

Interview with Robert L. Chatten

The Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training Foreign Affairs Oral History Project
Information Series

ROBERT L. CHATTEN

Interviewed by: Fred A. Coffey, Jr.

Initial interview date: July 1, 1994

Copyright 1998 ADST

Bio - Sketch

Q: At my house in McLean, Virginia. This is July 1, 1994. Bob, I'd like to ask you to start out by giving us a brief background - a bio-sketch of your USIA career item by item. You should cover the general types of subject matter that I indicated in the material I sent to you and whatever else seems relevant to this exercise.

CHATTEN: I was a newspaper man on The Salt Lake Tribune when I joined the Agency and had not pointed myself in any other direction for a number of years before that. While getting an undergraduate degree in journalism from the University of New Mexico, I had been fortunate enough to be able to work summers in the news business, first as a copy boy for the Associated Press in Louisville, Kentucky, and eventually as a reporter for The Louisville Times.

I had, partly as a consequence of that, never thought of majoring in anything other than journalism after my freshmen year at UNM. From there I went to Stanford.

Q: While at Stanford, what was your degree? Where you in a degree program?

Library of Congress

CHATTEN: I was the recipient of something called the Charles Samuel Jackson Jr. Fellowship, which had been funded by the owners of The Oregonian, of Portland, in memory of their son. He apparently had gone to Stanford, and so they funded a fellowship for a promising person to get a masters degree in communications and journalism. I graduated in Albuquerque in 1956 and married the girl I had been dating in Kentucky every summer for the previous six summers.

Q: Can you identify that lovely lady whom you married?

CHATTEN: Pat Chatten is "well and favorably known," as they say in consular cables, to an awful lot of people in USIA since at one time or another she met and was hostess to a lot of them in one or another of assignments. Daughter of a Baptist minister, we met playing tennis the summer we were sixteen on the courts of the Southern Baptist Seminary in Louisville. We headed off on our California adventure in a Ford which had five gallons of oil in a can in the trunk. I didn't even have to put in the dipstick. Every 200 miles you'd put in a quart.

Lure of the Foreign Service

Q: Somewhere along the line must have been a lure of working with the Agency. Were you attracted by something in the Foreign Service? What was it and how did you move in that direction?

CHATTEN: It probably started in Stanford. Because I became a disciple really as well as a student of Wilbur Schramm. Although I didn't realize it at the time, he was one of the intellectual godfathers of USIA, having done some of the original pioneering work in international communications. Taking Bill Schramm's international communications seminar at Stanford and getting exposure to the whole notion of transnational information flows and how people get their ideas about things in other cultures and other peoples—the notions of it and the techniques of it - I fell in love with the whole idea. After Stanford I

Library of Congress

spent two years at The Salt Lake Tribune, first as a general assignment reporter and then alternating between being a copy editor and one of a cadre of assistant city editors. At some point in that process I had decided I really ought to go overseas. I felt that I owed it to myself, that I owed it to my education. It was a pretentious notion, but pretentious notions come easily to people that age. I wanted to look at the United States from outside in. But I wanted to find a way to go overseas without selling my journalistic soul completely, so started thrashing around, applying at Stars and Stripes and even to do PR for Arabian-American Oil. All of that was leading down a blind alley when it occurred to me that what I really ought to do was to get back in touch with Wilbur Shramm. He said, Why don't you try USIA? I'll be in touch with some people there and I'll certainly recommend you. Later, I got somewhat more perspective on the esteem in which his name was held by not only communications theorists but also by people who had been doers in the earliest era of USIA. With the door thus ajar, I came back to Washington for the exams in May 1959.

Q: Did you take the Foreign Service Exam at the time?

CHATTEN: No, I did it the way people did it in those days. USIA administered its own. You went through a writing process that lasted a half a day or more then you did your panels. I flew in from Salt Lake City and stayed at the old YMCA—the Walter Jenkins Memorial YMCA—for those who remember that episode. I never had done anything remotely like it before. When I came out of the panel discussion, they told me that there was a good chance that they'd be able to tell me whether it was go or no go that very day. Think of the contrast with how things stretch out over eternity these days. Waiting for the results, I was sitting there with some of the people who turned that particular bureaucratic crank and we got on very chatty, familiar grounds. They confided to me something that has become more relevant over the years. They really thought that they had to be careful about how many young women they let get as far as the oral panels because the panelists went head over heels for almost all of them they let get in the door. They didn't want to overload the

Library of Congress

system with female officers, and while they certainly wanted to have an outreach and be fair, but you know—wink, wink, nudge, nudge.

Q: Uh, huh. Changes in the times.

JOT Process

CHATTEN: Barbara Harvey did make it through the process and was the only female in what turned out to be our class of eleven. In 1959 there were only twenty JOTs. Nine in May and eleven in September. That was it. People go around wringing their hands about follow-through and smaller intakes these days, but the Agency had at least as many people in those days as it does now, I'm pretty sure. There were at the time a lot of people in positions of senior and middle grade responsibility who had been brought in when the agency was created in 1953. There were old OWI and OSS and State Department people as well as a collection of old news people, many of whom weren't really sure about the JOT program. I encountered early on, as you must have, a lot of resistance to the notion that a bunch of youngsters who had not gone through the school of hard knocks, as they had, were going to inherit the Agency. I encountered at our first post, Manila, something that became standard later on: State Department people saying, "You seem like a bright, young man. Why don't you get out of this Mickey Mouse peripheral thing you're doing and get into the real Foreign Service." That was the roots of an abiding theme that persists to this day. I'm still, even now, trying to make sure that State Department people understand where it all fits together, what the function is.

The September 1959 group was sworn in George Allen's office. We played hooky from our training routine to go over in front of the White House and see Khrushchev's arrival on that first visit to Washington, when he drove up to Blair House. Those were heady times at the end of the Eisenhower Administration, when the Cold War was very much in full bloom.

Q: Then your training period was how long?

Library of Congress

CHATTEN: It was ten weeks. That was it.

Manila - First Post

Q: You mentioned Manila.

CHATTEN: They asked us where we wanted to go. I didn't have any preconceived notions, but having done a good bit of my growing up on the border, I thought maybe Latin America would be a good idea. I hadn't been anywhere abroad save for high school and college adventures in negotiating some goods and services in Ciudad Juarez. I put down a handful of preferences, but they ended up dividing us around the world. Of our group of eleven, three of us ended up in East Asia. Barbara Harvey, who had done her Masters on East Asian things and who really knew a good bit about the subject, and Jeremy Tryon, one of the three of us who had media background, ended up in Indonesia. The Chatten were assigned first to Burma, where Art Hummel was PAO. I had just read *Burma Surgeon*, about the only book out about the subject, when Art came in with a cable that said, "We don't have any housing for a JOT." Manila, a wonderful training post, was the fallback.

Q: What did you encounter when you got there? You were a JOT, who was the boss there? What kind of a setting did you enter?

CHATTEN: Dick Barnsley was PAO. He had been deputy to Bill Copeland, who was one of the old time newsies and a former Vice President of United Press in Latin America. Bill had gone back to Washington to be area director or head of IPS I forget which; he did both. So Dick was PAO and Lou Mattison was deputy PAO and of what I came to learn was a very large, highly articulated post in which everything the Agency had to offer in the field was present. It was a wonderful place to be a JOT. There were two assistant CAOs, plus a librarian and a branch post in Cebu. There were four officers in the information section, headed by Hal Schneidman, on his first agency assignment, after having been PR director for the city of Philadelphia and press agent for Victor Mature and Marge

Library of Congress

and Gower Champion. There was a radio officer, a topics officer, a press officer, and a publications officer. Then you had the whole VOA relay and transmitter apparatus and RSC Manila. If the post chose to rotate you around, as they did me, you could get a view of the agency in many of its dimensions. This prejudiced my attitude forever thereafter as to what constitutes a proper way to deal with a JOT, at least with a JOT who wants to become a generalist. That was opposed to the archetype: one with a degree in Soviet studies and who considered any assignment out of the Soviet sphere as peripheral.

A Great Training Environment - Huks, Many Ethnic Groups; Colonial Mentality; Policy Issues; Eisenhower Visit; Very Large Operation

Q: What was the program like in Manila those days? The USIS program. What were you trying to do?

CHATTEN: Let me set the scene a little bit. The Huk Rebellion, a peasant rebellion with a lot of communist influence, was still on the very near horizon behind us. It was very, very recent history to the extent that there were parts of the country that, while not proscribed, would have been a little difficult to deal with. That constituted one dimension to what everybody in the mission was doing, not just USIA in terms of interpreting what communism meant, or what we thought it meant in East Asia. Remember this was before we learned some of the things we later had impressed upon us in Vietnam. That was part of it.

Even more important was that we were, at that stage, in the immediate past out of the Colonial era. Only thirteen years previously, the Philippines officially had become a country. They took over the administration of their own affairs from the US just after the end of the war. The impact of this was a huge factor, coloring everything everybody in the mission did. The Colonial mentality still existed in the minds of many of the people in the Philippines, as well as an educational system, and a US-patterned government infrastructure as background legacies. Indeed, the Colonial mentality still existed in

Library of Congress

the minds of many Americans, who thought about and who made policy relating to the Philippines and East Asia.

Then you had the enormous US military presence, at the largest air base outside the continental United States (Clark) and the largest naval base outside of the continental United States (Subic Bay). These were, in just about everyone's mind, and the bulwark of freedom, democracy and all that is good and right against the Red menace in the Philippines

Then you have the fact that the language of instruction in the Philippine education system, which we created, was English after the third grade. While there were dozens of languages and seven major language groups in the linguistic cauldron of the Philippines, English was a tremendous program asset. I doubt we thought of it as the kind of program asset that it truly was.

Then you had an ambassador, Chip Bohlen, a Soviet specialist burned in the McCarthy era, and exiled to the Philippines, who had just departed as we arrived. Early in our tour we got one of those aberrations that the State Department produces sometimes, Ambassador John Dewey Hickerson III. He had been ambassador to Finland and he spent at least the time of our overlap there not really quite getting a handle on the distinction between Finland and the Philippines and the nature of the US relations between them. This caused all manner of goofy consequences in the relationship that you went around explaining and sweeping up after.

Then we had an Eisenhower visit, the Presidential trip to Japan that had gotten scrubbed when the advance party had been stoned. When the White House scrubbed Eisenhower's visiting Japan, the fallback was the Philippines.

In sum, I got my first USIS experience not only with this very large, articulated post, mission, and regional center, but also with all of the downstream implications of United States manifest destiny in Asia, which imposed themselves on the program. For good

Library of Congress

measure I got the opportunity to deal with a presidential visit and the opportunity to meet the President. Interestingly, it was the first chance that I had to see that a presidential press secretary, Jim Hagerty, was the chief advance man for the trip, could tell an ambassador what to do, indeed to push him around. That's a valuable lesson for somebody as green as I was, and anybody else.

Q: In the operation of the USIS program, did you find any particular meaningful things that USIS was doing with which you disagreed? Were there problems with making it a meaningful, useful activity? Were you happy with the program?

CHATTEN: Well, I didn't know what a program was, of course. So it was a little difficult for me at the time to answer the question compared to what. But it seemed to me to be a rational program. If there were things about what was going on that seemed a little funny to me as a former newspaperman, they had as much as anything to do with our relationship with AID. ICA, as it was known then, had an enormous presence and we had an Information Officer focused on just their activities. Later on when Alliance for Progress Information Officers were invented in Latin America, many people thought that this kind of liaison with the AID operation was unique, that they invented it. If there was anything that seemed a little strange to me, it was in the whole USG not being very introspective about the degree to which AID really changed, warped our relationship. We didn't seem to be very honest with ourselves about what we were putting into it and what those contributions permitted the Filipinos to do with their own resources. Its not that they didn't need assistance or the we as the former colonial power weren't the logical ones to give it, but we may have slowed the Filipinos' drive to be fully independent developing their own systems and their own government.

I don't want to make too much of this. President Ramon Magsaysay had, with our help, overcome an armed insurgency only short years before. Technical assistance was still looked at as a wonderfully successful tool which allowed an inspired leader to get the

Library of Congress

country back on the road to an independence that we and they had envisioned when we were the colonial masters.

Media Guarantee Program and Assessment

Q: Did you see any particular activity that was very successful or fell on its face or on the surface just floated along and no one wanted to say, "The Emperor doesn't have many clothes?"

CHATTEN: I don't think so. I think it was a good program. One of the things that came up while I was there was an evaluation of something that had been going on in the '50s called the information-media guarantee (IMG) program. Under it, the United States government put rather sizable amounts of money into subsidizing the import of books and magazines from the United States into the Philippines. This program had begun to atrophy in budgetary terms anyway and Dick Barnsley had the responsibility for looking at whether or not it ought to continue. He asked me to pursue it.

It was at that stage that I began to develop some perspective that later on proved useful to me, asking the question, "If we didn't do this, would it happen anyway?" I came back to Dick with an assessment that concluded this was a wonderful program, that there certainly ought to be American books and magazines in the Philippines, but we were very marginal. If this program didn't exist, it wouldn't make much difference. The publications still would enter to more or less the same degree that they were getting there already. The money, I concluded, probably ought to be spent on something else or not spent at all. The IMG programs went away. Now in a euphoric kind of mood, I suppose that one might think I had some impact on the decision. The truth is, I don't know.

Q: I remember that the program disappeared in about 1963-64. As a JOT, you were moved around the islands?

Library of Congress

CHATTEN: The post had had a history of having JOTs. Gordon Murchie, Jerry Inman, Lynn Noah had preceded me, so USIS Manila had a pretty good perspective on what a JOT was. With so many officers around, they didn't plug me into a slot to actually perform a line officer's function. I was still over-complement. This gave me a terrific opportunity to spend essentially a month each with press, publications, radio, TV, the branch post, RSC (maybe two), and the VOA relay station. I spent a month at the library, where I taught an elementary course on "What is Communism? What is democracy?" using those old USIA books of the same name, which we had then with the Grayson Kirk text.

CIA Using USIS Cover

It was in the Philippine portion of my career that I saw one of the two people that in my whole time in the Agency that I believe were CIA people under USIS cover. I have had lots of opportunity to look at the question. I've had lots of people ask me about it, as anybody of our generation has had. I think that this was an important early lesson, and it conditioned me to look at people carefully whose job was a little bit vague. In this particular case it was a Chinese-American who spoke little English. He was buried in the press and publications operation, and his task was liaison with the Chinese language media of the Philippines.

Q: By the way Bob, what did you think of his cover?

CHATTEN: I wasn't alarmed by it. I was certainly interested in it. And I was interested in the fact that nobody said anything about it. Nobody briefed me, this was my own conclusion. It may not even have been so, though I'm fairly well persuaded that it was. The Chinese Language media of the Philippines were heavily oriented toward Taiwan, minimizing the possibility of criticism or of our taking any heat from it from the people that he was dealing with. The Communist Party was outlawed in the Philippines at that time.

Library of Congress

The only other one that I have found in my time in the Agency came two assignments after that in the very early '60s, in Peru. In that case, a binational center grantee in Cuzco was either working directly for the station or was enchanted by the notion that that's what he ought to be doing. He would come down to Lima and might talk to the station chief before he talked to the PAO.

Those are the only two. I think that my own perspective on that subject matured over time, as I did, and tracked well with the Agency's standard wisdom.

Importance of Credibility

Credibility is just about the only thing that you've got going for you. You can spend a lifetime in the Agency, especially doing some of the things I did in student affairs, and trying to influence foreign media, in which you are routinely accused of working for the CIA. Credibility is gained only over a very long period of time through programs and experience and exposure and yet it can be shattered overnight. Its a very, very fragile kind of thing. I can remember in the student affairs experience of having people come at me all the time, saying, "You're a CIA person," when they didn't know anything about the CIA. Later, along when I was in the mid-career, academic year at UCLA, the standard assumption among all of the smart-ass graduate students was that of course, you work for the CIA." My answer in both cases, was, "I'm not, but if I were, I wouldn't tell you. Given that problem, why don't we set that question aside and look at what I'm doing? If what I'm doing is good or constructive, what the hell difference does it make who is doing it?"

Q: Bob, let's advance you on to your next assignment from Manila.

Where USIA Fits In

CHATTEN: Let me dwell on the lessons of Manila for one more moment. One of the things that was most useful to me, personally, and in my professional life, was beginning to get a sense of where USIA fits into the scope of what the US government does overseas

Library of Congress

- Where, organizationally and institutionally as well as functionally, we fit in. I referred previously to a kind of State Department condescension that came to be standard. What I got was the beginnings of a notion about where USIS fits in with the military, where it fits with the American private sector, but mostly, how it interacts with the rest of the government. That always seemed to me to be one of the great benefits that I got from going to a huge post as a JOT. People now seem to leave graduate school with a full set of prejudices on how their government works abroad. Whether they are right or wrong is not the point, but given my own experience and the complexity of the subject, all of this pomposity that seems to go with graduate studentship these days seems a bit much.

Q: Obviously its' sort of endemic of graduate students.

Off to Japan - Assistant Press and Publications Officer

CHATTEN: From Manila, I knew that there were three assignments coming open in East Asia. On April first in those days and for a number of years thereafter you were asked where you would like to go. It was known as the April Fool List. There were two openings in Indonesia and there was one in Japan. I asked for that one but I thought, its going to be Indonesia for me, boy. Miraculously, I ended with the Japan assignment as Assistant Press and Publications Officer in Tokyo. "Please be there yesterday," the cable said.

Q: What year was this, Bob?

CHATTEN: This was about Thanksgiving of 1960. And true to personnel's continuing way of doing things, they waited and waited to make a decision, and then said we had to be there immediately. One of my earliest, mild-mannered acts of defiance of the Agency was, asking permission to at least let us go via Hong Kong and buy some winter clothes. They reluctantly agreed.

George Hellyer - Thinkers and Doers

Library of Congress

We got to Tokyo in the last days of one of the great characters of the Agency of that day - PAO George Hellyer. He had been a tea planter in Indochina and had been swept up in the Agency's early net cast to get people who seemed appropriate to the task. He had reorganized the post into thinkers and doers, which was one of the great items of discussion of the whole Agency. It hadn't worked. There had been a program division, supposed to think about either an audience (labor or politicians) or a subject matter (economics). This was familiar ground later in the Agency but it was tried on a major scale first in Japan. Then there was the doers, the production division, which was supposed to crank out all the stuff aimed at either these audiences or the designated subject matter that the thinkers thought up. I became the Junior Doer. The production division was headed by Hank Goshio as Information Officer, who had been a thinker, and who as a Japanese-American had been one of World War II's Merrill's Marauders in Southeast Asia. He was a colorful, wonderful man heading a colorful cast of characters.

Q: Who was your immediate supervisor?

CHATTEN: My immediate supervisor was, again, one of the unique characters that the Agency doesn't have very many of anymore, Charlie Davis. Charlie Davis spoke fluent warehouse Japanese, which he had learned while in the military. Charlie was a high roller. Flamboyant and lazy, he very much enjoyed the contact part of his job and very much disliked the part of running a Press and Publications staff of 25 Japanese and trying to get a product out the door every day. When I showed up, he said, "Thank God you've come, I've got a lot of leave that I'm going to lose. Ciao." So straight off of this JOT experience, straight off of my week in Hong Kong buying my 3-year-old boy a coat, and my first custom-made suit...

Q: I hope it fit.

CHATTEN: I may still have it. Here I am with a whole crowd of Japanese to supervise and I didn't even know what the hell they were doing. Open the door and there would be a

Library of Congress

whole room of six or eight ladies operating Japanese typewriters. Perhaps you remember what Japanese typewriters look like, with several thousand characters on trays, but it looked unlike anything that I've seen before. But they were a vital cog. There was a whole copy desk which looked very much like my old copy desk in a newspaper newsroom. It was staffed with translators, who loved Adlai Stevenson when he went to the UN because he spoke in full sentences, and hated Eisenhower because of the ups and downs and lapses and long pauses in his syntax. Add a bunch of other people who were doing God knows what, dealing with the press, turning out publications. This was the deep-end-of-the-pool school of personnel management. I was lucky to dog-paddle my way through the earliest days of this.

Language Training - Alan Carter Never Spoke a Foreign Language

Q: Bob, initially did you get any language training?

CHATTEN: No. Assistant Press and Publications officer was considered an inside job. I came, during the course of our stay in Japan, to that most frustrating of points, the ability to ask several questions and not understand any of the answers. But there were a number of very talented and dedicated staffers who would accompany me on business out-of-doors. The Japanese staff certainly spoke English. This orientation ultimately led to my perspective on the importance of language. To take the case of another famous PAO to Japan, Alan Carter, he never spoke a word of a foreign language and who, for good measure denigrated the importance of speaking another language. He seemed to have arrived at the conclusion that if you know what you want then it's the other guy's problem to learn it, or, alternatively you can always get somebody to perform the basically technical function of interpreting. Most people know how much baloney that is, but it was one of those things that, for want of prior experience, I learned in a hurry in Tokyo.

Policies, MacArthur and Reischauer

Library of Congress

We're talking about a period in Japanese-American relations in which Douglas MacArthur II was ambassador. He was a smart, colorful man and he interviewed all new staff in the mission. It was very much a period of transition, in which MacArthur looked upon himself as being the one who was finally going to break down the occupation status and the occupation mentality. Whatever the legal status of occupation was at that moment, the occupation mentality was still there on both American and Japanese sides to some extent. So there were some situations analogous to my previous experience with colonial status in the Philippines. Partly as a function of this, MacArthur would not be seen publicly with any American uniformed officers, with the possible exception of some of the generals and admirals. But he wouldn't be photographed with them. I, as the junior doer, found myself in what seemed to me a curious position of having bird colonels come into my office and tell me the troubles that they had of liaison with the Embassy. But I was about the level who was authorized to talk freely to those guys. I'm sure there were people in the political section who were doing so at some level or other, but it was a strange time indeed.

Our Japan days saw the transition to the New Frontier. Kennedy had been elected but Eisenhower was still in office when we went. MacArthur was replaced by Edmund Oldfather Reischauer, a Japan scholar born in Japan of missionary parents, and fluent Japanese speaker, about whom some of the people in USIS Tokyo thought, "He'd be a good CAO." It was a yeasty period in Japanese-American relations because the nature of the relationship was changing dramatically, with the change further dramatized by these two very, very different characters of Douglas MacArthur II the nephew of the General and married to Vice President Alben Barkley's daughter, and Ed Reischauer, married to the granddaughter of a former Prime Minister of Japan. Much of what USIS attempted had to do with trying to interpret the nature of the relationship or the proper nature of the changing relationship, as we envisioned it. There aberrations in the US-Japan relationship, like "the nature of the labor movement" which was our creation but which went off in political directions that we had never anticipated. We were seized with trying to communicate the new look in the United States, with Camelot coming on line, and the Space Race. I can

Library of Congress

remember coming back into the office in the middle of the night in order to make sure that releases on Alan Shepherd, first American in Space, were properly pushed out to the media.

Program Highlights

Q: Did you get involved with any program which you thought made a difference in Japanese-US relationships? And our country programs and our country objectives? Did you get excited, did the hair stand sometimes and say, "Boy, this is it?" or "What are we doing here?"

CHATTEN: Hair-raising may not be totally apt but, sure, there were times when we felt we were doing something that really needed doing. In the Philippines it was the programming that we hung on the visit of the president. Then, as now, a Presidential visit provides wonderful hooks upon which to hang all kinds of messages and I was really an integral part of that.

In Japan I persuaded post management that what they needed was a Press Officer and a Publications Officer and that I ought to be the Publications Officer. That allowed opportunities to do all kinds of things. One of them, the first time that anything I did ever got incorporated into Congressional testimony, was the production of the Kennedy Inaugural Address in a bilingual version pamphlet. It had the specific purpose of marrying Japanese desire to learn English to their curiosity about, and our need to explain, the new leadership in Washington. The English language is one of your great program assets in Japan, and it was then and is today. It was a real rush to be able to come out with something that at the same time was a manifestation of the new winds blowing in Washington and the new winds blowing in Japanese-American relations. It had a huge acceptance among the Japanese. By the time I left we went through nine printings of that thing. I would order up some number that seemed large to me, 20,000 or so, and they'd be gone in a week. So I'd order it again. You could approach an important university's

Library of Congress

language people or their English Department and say “Look what I’ve got,” and they’d say, “I’ll take a zillion. That was exciting.

Q: In some countries I know, the Publications Office had quite a bit of money and so they would reach out and grab titles, grab topics that weren't particularly pertinent. Did you inherit some of that? Did you have to make some hard decisions in saying, “Some of these things are not useful for our program?”

CHATTEN: Sooner or later, everybody has had to deal with ten thousand pictures of Lyndon Johnson or something equally difficult, but that's the cost of doing business. The sparks were really on the side of what was exciting. We started two magazines while I was there. The Labor Information Officer and I put together a new periodical, a quarterly aimed at labor audiences. That was great fun, yeasty stuff for anybody at any level, let alone somebody who's not out of his '20s yet.

Q: Did you find some interesting reaction to that labor magazine?

CHATTEN: No question about it. There were elements within the heavily politicized Japanese labor movement that still looked to the United States as a model, as a source of information and wisdom. Organized labor hadn't been one of my interests, but here we were with an interested audience in the Japanese labor movement at a time when the relationships between post-war power blocs were still being shaped.

Berlin Wall Pamphlet

The other excitement in publications began with a cable in the middle of the night telling us to get together with the Brits, the French and the Japanese, quickly. Washington was going to supply camera-ready copy on a worldwide pamphlet about the Berlin Wall, which was still under construction. I have over the years kicked myself, I don't know how many times, that I did not keep my copy or copies of this thing that we put out on a crash basis. We met at the British Embassy but the US was supplying the copy and photos.

Library of Congress

The Agency was going to get the text to us in the fastest way possible, which was to be translated into Japanese and fitted into Washington's layouts. It was a first class piece of work, really good visually. We put a lot of effort into it and we got that sucker out in record time, in tens of thousands.

Q: What was the Japanese reaction to this?

CHATTEN: It's hard to measure in retrospect. I think probably very good. Here's an issue around which we, they, the world, might retreat into war and they wanted to know everything that was knowable about it. They certainly wanted to know how we felt about it, and there we were with a quick-hitting product. Remember, those were the days before you could tell a story like that instantaneously via television.

Reliable Ally?

Q: Would you think there was any connection to the symbolic bit of the Berlin Wall and our reaction to it for the Japanese to assess how reliable an ally we are, we were. How quickly were we ready to respond?

CHATTEN: The question of the reliability of the US as an ally came later in my experience in East Asia after Vietnam.. If there was a question in policy terms it had more to do with United States' orientation toward Europe as opposed to Asia.

Q: For one reason or another USIS/Japan has been a particular pilot project, being pushed and pulled.

CHATTEN: While I was there, the post was reorganized into a more traditional model, away from the thinker/doer configuration, which was judged by Washington to have been a failure even though some of the ideas persisted and became Standard Operating Procedures later in the history of the Agency.

Library of Congress

The Japanese must have thought us quaint indeed or at least “the inscrutable West” for doing some of the things that we did organizationally and because of some of the products we put out. I don't think they were very critical at all in those days, concentrating more on just trying to figure us out. That is, except for the people who would march every couple of days in front of the Embassy Annex, our building, on their way to demonstrate at the Diet. Anecdote: We were in the Annex, we were in the Mantetsu Building, which had been the Manchurian Railway headquarters. It was on the route that would be taken by all people who had reason to demonstrate outside the Diet, which was a Japanese thing to do in those days. As long as they were coming by the Embassy Annex, we would get included in the thing. My secretary was at the window late one afternoon laughing, and saying “Come look.” The orderly, four abreast demonstrators were carrying signs protesting the high price of butter and eggs and cheese, dairy products, and the hydrogen bomb.

Q: Well that's an interesting mixture.

CHATTEN: Not only was it funny at the time but it was instructive about the Japanese as well, both in their organizational tactics and in how they viewed us. As long as they had gotten together to harangue Parliament, they might as well take a shot at us as a target of convenience, the logic must have gone.

Q: Time for taking stock. Where were you in the Agency at that point?

Next - Latin America?

CHATTEN: When the time came for my next assignment to be considered, the question really arose as to whether I was going to stay in Japan and become an East Asia hand.

When Pat and I drove out of the valley of the Great Salt Lake, we said to each other, “We'll try this for three or four years and if it works, that's fine. If it doesn't, we can always go back to newspapering.” In that context I had a profound interest in seeing the Agency in as many of its configurations as possible as early as possible. This would allow us

Library of Congress

to determine whether or not it was what we wanted to do, but to give the Agency the opportunity to have the reciprocal effect, to find out whether I was its kind of guy as well. And so as seductive as the thought of staying on in Japan or becoming primarily an East Asia specialist, I thought it was more important to go somewhere else, if I possibly could.

Either by luck or analysis, it dawned on me that in communicating with Washington, you must keep the message simple. You don't clutter it up with gray, you don't get into nuance. If the bottom line is you want to go to Latin America, you convey that. Japan being Japan, a lot of high ranking people came and went. Deputy Director Don Wilson breezed into town, sat down in my office, conspicuously got out his watch, and said, "Tell me your life story. You've got two minutes. What do you want to do?" I said, "I want to go to Latin America." He said, "Why?" I said, "There's a new President, the Alliance for Progress, I grew up along the border, I speak pigeon Spanish and I think that the Agency and I owe it to each other to get better acquainted as early on in my career as possible. What else do you want to know?" He took notes.

I don't know if it was Don Wilson, whom I had met before when he was with Time, whether it just happened but when the time came, despite the leadership of the post saying, "Of course, you're going to stay," the assignment came through as Student Affairs Officer—Lima. After language training.

Q: So you had two years in Tokyo?

CHATTEN: I had just over a year, with Pat teaching English at Waseda University and a 3-4 year old, living in the old Perry House apartment building. We lost a baby during that time, in a nightmare experience of driving the streets of an unfamiliar part of Tokyo, with Pat in the midst of a spontaneous abortion, trying to find the Seventh-Day Adventist Hospital.

Q: That dear price you paid was one most stateside Americans could never understand.

Library of Congress

CHATTEN: You remember that early on in the JOT program, before I became associated with it, they would send you to your first JOT training assignment and then, very often, out of area. At the time I was involved, you usually remained in your area for your JOT and your follow-on assignment. After that, going to another area was not considered outlandish. So it wasn't considered an eccentric thing to do. They only eccentricity from the Agency's point of view was in why would anyone want to leave Tokyo, or why would I want to get out of East Asia? But, I knew what I thought I wanted. USIA was creating new positions all over Latin America—Alliance for Progress Information Officer, Student Affairs Officer, Labor Information Officer.

Comfortable with USIA

Q: As you wound up your tour in Tokyo, did you do so with some satisfaction? Somehow the marriage between you in the Agency was working out in those earliest years?

CHATTEN: I was beginning to feel like the Agency and I were kind of a fit. But I had had two good PAOs and one strange one at that time. And I had had a really bad ambassador in the Philippines, and two very good but decidedly different ambassadors in Japan. I was beginning to get a notion that all of these things had to do with whether you were in the right time and the right place with the right people. There really wasn't any pat answer to it. You had to work it out, not unlike most of the rest of life.

By the time I got into the PAO business myself in 1970, I had worked for eleven of them, and there were very good ones and very bad ones. Some were appropriate to the circumstances and some inappropriate, with a bunch of people in the middle. They formed a bell-shaped curve, just like you find with editors and ambassadors and with all groups.

Q: Did you agree by and large with the policies you were instructed to implement as a "doer?"

Library of Congress

CHATTEN: In my first tours, I heard policy discussed very little. Programs and how to carry them out were the main focus, and not just in USIS. Policy, by and large, seemed reasonable to me. I was delighted that in the early days of the New Frontier in Japan, for example, there was instituted something that continues to this day—an annual home and home exchange of cabinet officers. We now do this with other countries as well, but the Kennedy Administration, early on, thought it would be a good thing to do, both symbolically and substantively, with the Japanese. This kind of parity seemed to me to be not only good as a policy but also good as a way of manifesting that policy. It does raise the question, repeatedly confronted during my time in government, of when and how the process of executing a policy goes through a metamorphosis and becomes policy itself. The reasons for doing things change or are forgotten, but what you're doing continues. Illustrations abound but just take Cuba as an example.

On to Lima - Student Affairs Officer

Q: You jumped to Lima, Peru. Any particular thoughts you have about the transition—language training, for instance?

CHATTEN: Well, I did my Spanish language training in the old FSI, in the basement of Arlington Towers, like generations of foreign service people did. Sixteen weeks of it and I was shipped off to be a card carrying New Frontiersman in Latin America. That was where on word of the highest authority, the clock was ticking and it was one minute to midnight. Experience has demonstrated that the clock is still ticking and it is still one minute to midnight, but, at the time, that's what we were charged up about. I was going to be a front line fighter. Despite some earlier nibbling at the edges of the university audience with BN student affairs grantees, the new Student Affairs Officers were supposed to orient the programming of the whole post toward students.

Q: Was this your generation?

Library of Congress

CHATTEN: My assignment preceded that phrase. Vice President Nixon had had two of his six crises (you remember his early book) in Latin America with students. One of the them had been at the Central University in Caracas and the other had been at San Marcos in Lima. The Agency, in response to that, created six of these positions around the hemisphere. The two hottest ones were Caracas and Lima in terms of their political visibility, because of Nixon. I showed up in the PAO's office and said, "Here I am. I'm your new Student Affairs Officer, what am I supposed to do?" He said, "Oh shit, I thought they told you that in Washington." He didn't have any idea what a Student Affairs Officer did and I didn't either.

After being judged successful as Tokyo's first publications officer, along about here, it's beginning to become dramatically evident that one of the better things that can happen to you is to go into a job that didn't exist before. You become the greatest expert in the world on the subject and it is whatever you say it is. I'd done that in Japan as Publications Officer. Question: What's a Publications Officer in Japan supposed to do? Answer: Start a new labor magazine and turn political speeches into English texts. What's a Student Affairs Officer in Peru supposed to do? Answer: What do I have that they want? Books.

Books - the Entry

Q: Who's they?

CHATTEN: Students and, in general, the higher academic community of Peru. By extension of Nixon's San Marcos experience, I'm supposed to devote my energies to communicate with this portion of Peruvian Society. If you interpret USIS's role as concerning itself with how foreigners perceive the United States, that's fair.

Q: How did you go about it?

CHATTEN: I began to figure out the size of the audience, which was damn big, and their geographic spread and their political inclinations. I then had to ponder what I might

Library of Congress

conceivably do as one person with the resources of one USIS post, drawing for additional resources on whatever I could suck out of Washington or the AID mission or where ever else I could find them. What could I do? How can you impact upon this audience? What are your messages, what do you want to say to them? How are you going to go about it? That sort of analytical process led me to the conclusion that what I wanted to talk about were essentially two subjects: the Alliance for Progress, in all its many manifestations, and the seemingly natural academic pursuit of American Studies. .If my orientation was toward the academic community, it seemed to me that, in the long-term interest of USIS, we should help develop a mechanism through which lasting messages/communication about the United States might be channeled. American Studies Programs seemed to me to be a way to go about it.

Well, that may have been a proper conclusion but it certainly didn't deal appropriately with the academic environment of Peru at that time, where they had never heard of area studies, let alone, American Studies. San Marcos was kind of a tough nut to crack on my first attempt, though it wasn't a monolith. So I went to Catholic University, the Pontificia, which was important historically in Peru and on the Continent. We'd talk around the subject and it soon became obvious that they didn't have any idea about area studies. They were oriented toward the traditional, Latin American academic modalities of very packaged curricula in which everyone in a faculty or college took exactly the same courses. What I had in mind was an arrangement where we could supply a Fulbright Professor into the faculties of Economics or Letters or Law or something. A professor or two could teach something about the American perspective on, for example, development economics. They talked endlessly about "development" in the abstract, but it had never occurred to them that the economics of development could be a separate subject.

Once you sold them on the idea, then you couldn't get them to focus on just having one professor a semester, or two. They then started talking about a whole school or an

Library of Congress

institute, things beyond their means or ours. The result of it was, as in so many dealings with Peru, nothing happened.

Q: Lot of talk, no action.

Seminars - Alliance for Progress

CHATTEN: I learned early that Peruvian academics had a hard time thinking small or doing big. I needed a better approach. As a result, I devoted most of my energies to combining their need for books, which I could supply in quantities important to them, and seminars about the Alliance for Progress, playing on their consuming interest in development. I made a deal where, for any professor of my target faculties who would adopt Samuelson as an economics text, I would supply the books. Samuelson didn't exist in Spanish at that time, which was a separate problem that had to be dealt with later on, but many advanced students could read English. Textbooks in Peruvian Universities were rare, since the professors were making extra money by selling their own notes.

I ended up doing a series of seminars. I got 30,000 to do my first big show in the seminar biz in which I brought to the Lima BNC 200 upper level students and young professors from all of the major universities and the Escuelas Normales Superiores, the places that trained secondary teachers. Identifying two hundred of these people all over the country, inviting them to Lima for two weeks, putting them up, paying their transportation, organizing a two week seminar - you can imagine the organizational complexity of all this, and we pulled it off! We spent a week talking about The United States, everything from literature to politics. I brought professors in from the United States, I grabbed up every Fulbright Professor who was in the country at the time and I used the resources of the mission. I did the same thing the second week, which was on the Alliance for Progress. The first week, which they didn't know what the hell I was talking about but it was important and we gave it a chance. The second week focused on the development of

Library of Congress

Peru, which was a subject that interested them, and the label that we put on it was Alliance for Progress. They cared more about the subject than the label.

An extra benefit was to get people into our binational center where we staged it all. This was assuredly one way to help the BNC in its transition from being an English teaching institution and library to something like a program platform. We had a wonderful time doing it.

Then I took my show on the road. I did one for the northern universities and Normales Superiores. I would do one occasionally as an "American Week" at various places. This became a very useful vehicle of choosing target faculties in the whole university system of Peru.

Dangerous Situations

Q: Bob, there must have been some resistance by the Leftist groups, the student groups, some manifestations, even personal threats?

CHATTEN: Yes, all of the above. And I couldn't or wouldn't do it now. And I would be reluctant as a PAO or a program manager to ask a young officer to put himself into the situations I found myself in. But the PAOs, I had three PAOs in Peru, were willing, either because they were hands-off managers or didn't know what I was doing. That was where I learned what tear gas smells like, down around San Marcos. Going off to places like Ayacucho, which shortly after my tenure in Peru became way out of bounds, was part of the game. They threw the Peace Corps out and it became a war zone, much later being the center of Shining Path guerrilla activity. But nobody else knew what the hell I was supposed to do, so I went.

Academic Changes - Credit Hours

Library of Congress

Q: Was there any long term affect from these programs, so you can look back and say well, we made a difference?

CHATTEN: It's hard to know, but, sure, there were things at the time that you felt very good about. In retrospect, exposing people to the concept of credit hours may have been as revolutionary as anything that I had to say about the Alliance for Progress. We took them for granted and didn't know there was any other way to do it. They took for granted the notion that you entered the university and stayed with your class throughout your whole career. Failing a subject in their system was almost unheard of because if you failed a piece of the set curriculum, you had to repeat the whole year and couldn't stay with your class. Introducing the notion that there is an other way going at higher education, credit hours, was in the Peruvian context of the day, a revolutionary concept. Thanks more to AID's major investments in Peruvian higher education than to me, its fairly standard now in Peru. But I was one of the forces bringing them into contact with this and other ways of dealing with higher education. Its useful to note at this point that controversial Peruvian President Fujimori came out of La Molina, the national agricultural university which was very much the creature of a big contract AID had with North Carolina State University. Fujimori, as La Molina rector, came from what in Peruvian terms was a very progressive, US-type educational environment. I didn't introduce the notion to them that having text books was probably better than not having text books. But they didn't have any and so my ability to actually put tens of thousands of books into individual hands and into the libraries of Peruvian universities was a plus. Libraries in Peruvian universities were, by and large, a joke. But sometimes I could put more books in than they could lock away in a cabinet.

Q: Yeah, that's kind of standard procedure in the Third World, locking the books away to avoid pilfering for one thing.

CHATTEN: To come back to the theme that seemed important in East Asia, I continued to try get a handle on what constitutes a proper career trajectory in the Agency. In Lima, I

Library of Congress

was getting my cultural card punched. My original ambition was to get back on the media side, where all of my viscera really were anyway.

Q: Known as the Queen of Battle?

Bolivia - Information Office at Large Post

CHATTEN: I was a newspaperman after all. In some sense I still think of myself as a newsie, even though in the overall scheme of things, I spent a lot more of my life doing USIA type of work. By the time we left Peru and I understood what the cultural side of the operation was about, I was beginning to develop the notion that what the Agency called for was not a cultural officer or an information officer, but somebody who was a USIA officer. That, of course, had been the notion of the JOT program. But at that moment, anyway, I still was oriented toward getting myself back onto the information side of the house. The biggest countrywide was "Well, this is my audience and this is how I choose to deal with them." It was a lot of fun.

Q: Let's begin our second session of this interview. We've got you into Bolivia, starting up an information program, at least partly on cultural section turf. Take it from there.

CHATTEN: We're talking about 1965 to 1967, in many ways a watershed time for the Agency as well as an absolutely fascinating time for me and for my family. The Agency was approaching its 1967 high water mark, in which it had the greatest resources in real terms than it ever had at any one time. It was mostly down hill ever after that, except for two or three years of early Charlie Wick. We had, for example, sixteen Americans in Bolivia when I went there. That was more than we had in USIS Mexico in Thailand when I was running those programs. Just as order of magnitude it's useful to keep that in mind. The Binational Center Program peaked as well in that same period.

Q: That number of personnel included the Binational Center people, the grantees?

Library of Congress

CHATTEN: Yes, it did. As you remember, that was an era of transition for the Binational Center people in which they had only recently escaped the worst of their contract status and were beginning to emerge from the back of the bus. This eventually led to their integration into the career service. We had an American grantee in the Binational Center in Sucre, one in Santa Cruz, two in Cochabamba and two in La Paz.

The fellow in Santa Cruz was an old high school teacher of mine who had split with his wife and decided that a whole new life was really what he needed. He remarried a much younger woman, somehow found his way to the BNC program, and said, "Send me to the ends of the earth." So, voila, Santa Cruz, Bolivia. When I learned that this fellow, who had been the Spanish teacher and drama coach at Roswell New Mexico High School was there, I looked him up and we had a great reunion. Our positions reversed and I became a kind of mentor in the ways of USIS and the bureaucracy. It was fun.

Bolivia at that time was only a year beyond another of the iterations of the revolutions that so characterized it and during our two years there, there were four governments, though peacefully instituted, for a change. That colors a great deal of how you go about what you do and say. We had an enormous AID mission and a big military group, because the governments were largely run by the military. The colorful Air Force general, Rene Barrientos, "el paladin de los Andes," was president when I arrived. Then we had him and the General commanding the Army as co-Presidents for a period. Because you can run for president, under the Bolivian Constitution that was in effect at that time, only after you have been out of uniform for six months, Barrientos resigned from the Air Force, retroactively of course, to run. Then we had General Ovando, the head of the Army, as president, and then Barrientos again after he was inevitably elected. We tailored our messages largely in terms of the Alliance for Progress but the programs were not terribly distinct from what many people are trying to do in promotion of Democracy in the post Cold War Era. It just takes on a different name. It helped to have large resources in the AID mission of course.

Library of Congress

Q: Did you have access to those resources?

CHATTEN: In many ways, we did. We could tap into them for example, for speakers and visitors. We had a good relationship with the AID mission there, which had very professional leadership. AID was doing some things that were easy to talk about positively. But one of their programs has become an almost classic example of the law of unintended consequences that we see at work in Washington so often. They were opening up migration roads into the under populated high jungle from the more populated altiplano portions of the country. This was in part an agricultural program, part internal migration, which had all kinds of potentially positive and large scale sociological and economic dimensions to it. Over time, some of that migration did indeed take place but most importantly, years later, these became the transportation and communication network for the drug trade. International cocaine traffic was not a factor at that time. The raising and selling of coca was entirely legal and its consumption primarily local. You could go into the market and fill up your pockets with coca leaves for a few cents any day you wished.

Drugs not a Major Factor

Q: Did you consider that a negative aspect? Was your program at all couched against the growing of drugs, cocaine, at that time?

CHATTEN: The international drug traffic was not a factor in the Andes of those days. It seems incredible now, considering what has happened there and in the rest of the world and, not least, in our own country. There was a perceived threat from domestically grown or Caribbean grown marijuana but the big menace was heroin, out of the Golden Triangle. Cocaine was just a distant blip on the screen in those days.

Q: Well USIS, to my knowledge, did not get involved in the program against growing drugs until the 1970s and we launched into it heavily in Thailand.

Library of Congress

CHATTEN: We got involved in the Andean countries later on. By the time I got to Colombia in 1972, it had really become a consideration and was indeed a subject of no small contention between our post and the USIA support mechanisms in Washington. We knew that it was a major factor in the bilateral relationship between Colombia and the United States, that it had serious international dimensions and that it was on the rise as a factor in the internal dynamics of Colombia. But it was hard to persuade anyone in Washington that we ought to get their attention and resources focused upon this. Fortunately, at that stage, we were a big enough post that we could do considerable programming ourselves. As you know, it was happening in Thailand at the same time. To a certain degree we could go our own way. We had the support of the area office in the sense that their blessing was contingent only on having drug traffic fully justified in our country plan.

But in those earlier times in Bolivia, the focus was the Alliance for Progress. It was under that banner of infrastructure development that the development of a national market became a priority. That wasn't unreasonable since there were no paved roads outside of the cities in Bolivia in those days.

Q: How did the USIS program accommodate this focus on development?

CHATTEN: You'll recall that domestically the New Frontier had gone on to become the Great Society in the transition from Kennedy to Johnson. But the programs that had been set in motion in the hemisphere under the Alliance for Progress - in bilateral programs and internal development programs - were still essentially the same programs. A large dimension to the bilateral relationship in each of the counties of the Americas revolved around things that were done under the umbrella of the Alliance for Progress. Also, it's important to remember that, quite contrary to the prohibitions against USIA involvement in "nation building" which emerged during the John Reinhardt administration of USIA,

Library of Congress

in the Johnson years, USIS posts often were engaged in programs that could be called developmental.

Q: Would you call that "nation building?"

Radio - Media Seminars

CHATTEN: I think a lot of people then did, though we didn't usually use that term. If you stood back and looked at the seminars that I was running for media people, these, were definitely efforts not only to orient the media people to our point of view domestically and internationally, but also real efforts at development of the professionalism of those media people. We said so, self-consciously. They realized their own state of development. They talked about it openly. You can't help but talk about it when the sound deadening device on the walls of your radio studio is egg cartons, which work wondrously well, or cow dung plastered on the wall, which also works very well. It was no secret to them that they were not running high option radio stations. I did a week-long national seminar for program managers and station owners from all over this France sized country in La Paz. I brought them together with professional journalists and radio people and people who really knew what they were doing including Peter Strauss, who a number of years later became head of the Voice of America. The emphasis was upon how radio could contribute to the development of Bolivia. The fact that USIS was the facilitator of that discussion was, for them and me, a chance to be participants in what we wanted the Alliance to represent.

We're talking about 1965 to 1967, in which the debate was escalating dramatically within the United States about our involvement in Vietnam. Much of the material that we in the field were getting from the Agency had to do with that. There was an assumption, on the part of some people in Washington in particular, that the thing that is consuming us as North Americans is of as consuming interest to people in other parts of the world.

I can't speak for all parts of the world, but most assuredly in Bolivia and, I think, for most parts of Latin America their interest in Vietnam revolved around the degree to which it

Library of Congress

absorbed our resources and it focused our national attention away from the Third World and its development problems. They were interested in their own development. All of the serious people in the society were interested in how Bolivia could put itself together better. Their interest in us, aside from some historical roots, really revolved dramatically around what we could do to help them get ahead. That formed an important part of what you would do when you put together a national radio seminar, or a similar one we did for the print media. The radio seminar was titled "Radio at the Service of the People." In trying to make themselves better radio people, they had a notion, not widespread in the media of the United States, of radio as an instrument of social engineering. We tried to give them alternative ways of looking at their task, but it was their perspective and they were entitled to it.

It helps to remember that, in the second poorest country of the hemisphere, radio was truly important as a communication medium. In USIS, we had our own radio studio. This had a great effect upon my subsequent career in the Agency because among the people who came down to our national Radio Seminar was Ray Millette from the Voice of America's Latin American division. He was running the Field Services Branches, which supplied programs to field posts for use on stations which were interested and willing to use them. You did this in every imaginable configuration. You would use music programs, which they liked a lot, as bait to get them to take more heavily freighted stuff. For that matter, music itself carried its own important messages about the US. We did all of the things that USIS posts did in parts of the world where media placement was possible and important. Because radio was so central to our program, I developed an interest in it and came to the attention of the people in the Voice of America. And so after Bolivia, our fourth consecutive assignment abroad, I ended up at the Voice of America, replacing Ray Millette as Chief of Field Services branch at the Latin American Division. With the exception of a somewhat smaller operation in Africa, our preparation of programs for placement was unique in the Voice at that time. The nature of radio in Latin America made it all possible. Package programming and local placement now have become a large part of what the Voice is

Library of Congress

about. We weren't even using VOA money. We were a branch of the Latin American division, but spent 350,000 dollars of program money that came to field services from the Area Office. They recognized radio as such an important part of the of the communications process in Latin America that they were funding it.

Traveling about Bolivia to help set up these media seminars led to a number of interesting side effects. I became stranded at one time in a place between Sucre and Santa Cruz, called Camiri. I was, according to a missionary family I found there, the first American Embassy Official in eight years to spend the night in Camiri, even if it was only because the Lloyd Aereo Boliviano plane broke down. Not long afterward, Camiri came up on a lot of people's maps because it was where the Bolivian military headquartered their search for Che Guevara. This became another dramatic dimension to that period of our lives.

Che Guevara - the Search

Bolivia, as many people know, geographically is not on the way anywhere, but we found ourselves in the unaccustomed role of being inundated with international media and visitors of every description from abroad, who came looking for Che. It's worth noting that when the Bolivian Government first started coming to the Embassy and saying, "He's out there," we didn't believe it. Many thought that the Bolivians were just trying to shake us down for more military equipment and using Che as a trigger word. Some friends in the intelligence business were absolutely persuaded that Che had been killed in Africa. It turned out he wasn't, of course, and he ended up in the wildest, most inaccessible place you can possibly imagine. He might be out there yet if they hadn't made some really dumb mistakes. They isolated themselves from access to either Brazil, Chile, or Peru, where they might have gotten supplies. They cut themselves off from most of whatever help they might have gotten from one or another of the communist parties of Bolivia. They were out there with the arrogant notion that all they had to do was to show up and espouse revolutionary rhetoric and the campesinos would rise up. Well the Bolivian campesino is

Library of Congress

a very conservative person, just like campesinos and farmers everywhere, and they don't take readily to foreigners. Especially ones with guns.

Q: Was USIS playing a role in this? Did you describe what a bad guy he was, what he represented?

CHATTEN: We were as late as everybody else. By the time we got around to acknowledging that Che Guevara was indeed out there, we were just going along servicing the media with whatever we could get. The story was way ahead of us by that time. There were dissenting opinions at the time but the wisest counsel, and the one we pursued basically, was to let it be the Bolivians' story, not ours. A US military training team had trained the ranger battalion which captured Che but the Bolivians were all too ready to confirm that Cuba was a festering wound in the Western Hemisphere and Che was proof of the progression of the disease. The Bolivian Communists themselves were splintered with three communist parties: Trotskyites, a mainstream group that followed a Moscow line, and a more revolutionary one that looked to China. We left while the Che affair still was unfolding but I'm convinced that our people were really trying to persuade the Bolivians not to kill him, not to make a martyr of Che Guevara. The Bolivians weren't having any of it. They were saying, "Look, this guy has been killing our soldiers. He is an insurrectionist, a communist, which is anathema to our view of what the Government ought to be, and he is armed and dangerous and has proved it." Arguing with them about the international repercussions of making Che Guevara a martyr to many all over the world didn't face them. They meant to get rid of the guy, and they did.

Q: How long did he live after capture?

CHATTEN: I don't know for sure, but not long. A Frenchman captured with Guevara, Regis Debray, who became a fairly well-known author, was the son of a prominent politician in France. The prevailing opinion in France at that time, at least as represented by the French Government, was, "Who do these Bolivians, who only recently came

Library of Congress

down from the trees, think they are? Arresting and holding in prison the son of a Paris councilwoman?" The poor French Ambassador would have to go into the foreign office and convey these arrogant messages. They of course wouldn't throw him out on the seat of his pants, but that was sort of the net effect of it. He was widely seen to be a very unhappy camper.

Q: I'll bet he was. Bob, do you figure with all of the activity going on in Bolivia and the overall nation building effort, that the USIS program was really important? Were you discovering any uses of the information instrument that you hadn't used before? Or were you feeling little bit disillusioned that after all the US Information Agency was still fairly new or was still experimenting? What were your views at the time?

CHATTEN: We did the best that we could at the time, and had some effect. Judged individually and in the short run, the effects of our programs are almost always transitory. The effects of them cumulatively may have had some more durable downstream consequences in terms of Bolivian development and later development of the media. We probably had more effect on the media then we had on the academic community, which was fairly thoroughly radicalized and very difficult to talk to. So much of what we do is in the seed planting business, that its hard to wait around to see whether the plant comes up and bears the kind of fruit you intended. We may have had a disproportionate share of Agency resources at that time, but Bolivia was considered important. It had had one of what were considered the three real revolutions in 20th Century Latin America, with Mexico and Cuba joining them on that list. And it was to the everlasting credit of the Eisenhower Administration, for example, that it sent Milton Eisenhower around the hemisphere in 1958 to assess developments. Important among these assessments was whether or not the Bolivian revolution of 1953 was a real one. And what did it mean for the United States? The answer came back, in essence, "they are not a threat to us. Leave them alone. Let them work it out with as much developmental help as we can provide. Let's help the thing go in directions that are useful to them and not threatening to us. If we

Library of Congress

had taken that attitude toward Cuba, let's say, who knows what would have happened? We did have the opportunity in Bolivia and we took it.

Miners - Two USIS Officers

Q: I have another question about Bolivia. Were the miners on your target audience list? Did you work with leaders of the mining syndicates at all? The mining sector seems to be a rather dark mark, or questionable mark concerning our relationship with Bolivia?

CHATTEN: The tin miners were the heart of the organized labor movement in Bolivia. They were, to a large extent, radicalized politically. We communicated with them as best we could about what the intentions of the United States were toward Bolivia. This was not a group that we had much success in getting leader grantees out of, though occasionally one would crop up. You'd try to keep hammering away that we were a force for good in Bolivia, supporting modernization of the government mining corporation. But this wasn't always credible from their perspective, especially when any sales of tin by the General Services Administration from the US Strategic stockpile would drive the world price of tin down, or at least dampen it.

Remember that only two years before a group of Americans had been held hostage by the miners. Mike Krystula and Tom Martin, of USIS were among them. They finally were released and the President brought them up to the US for Christmas, though there is some doubt he ever really understood what had been going on and what both had been doing.

One of the things that you got accustomed to in Bolivia was sound of dynamite exploding, proof that you can get used to damn near anything. People who had grown up around the mines played with sticks of dynamite, usually for their own amusement, but with more sinister uses always implicit. It could scare the liver out of you if you didn't have any context to put it in, and it was a little disquieting even if you did.

Library of Congress

As I mentioned, one of the strong emphases of the AID program was to try to help COMIBOL, the state mining corporation, rationalize its investments. It represented almost the entirety of Bolivia's foreign exchange and if you're in the development business, as all of us were one way or another, it became a matter of USG concern how they were going to use this money. That was how they generated what little they were able to repay to the United States from what we were putting in, theoretically as loans. Thus there was a mining dimension whenever you would address yourself to any Bolivian public, be they universities, government, or leadership elements in the media. Fortunately we had an articulate AID director.

Crash of U-2

There are two other dimensions to my Bolivia story and then I'll get off of it. There's no such thing as a dull two years there.

One Thursday afternoon we got a cable in the embassy saying there was a U-2 flying due south out of the United States. They had lost contact with the pilot and believed him dead or unconscious. He was on autopilot, we were told, and if he continued on course, he would crash in the far south of Peru, the far north of Chile, or the far west of Bolivia. "Please inform foreign office that we mean them no harm." The foreign office was informed that we meant them no harm, just in case this bizarre eventuality would occur.

By noon the next day, reports began to drift in that there had been a plane crash in a remote area of far western Bolivia, near the Chilean border. We began to put two and two together and formed a working group. Larry Pezzulo, number two in the political section, was on it. A good friend, he subsequently was a two-time Ambassador and Director of Catholic Relief Services and a point man on US policy toward Haiti. There was a former cop from the CIA station, a guy with the wrong kind of mentality about what his task was, and the flamboyant Air Attach# Ed Fox. We saddled up on Friday evening and headed south in a carryall to Oruro, a big mining town on the Altiplano, to see if we could track

Library of Congress

down what really had happened. We discovered that the Bolivian highway service, had actually been out to the remote area where the plane came down and had gathered up the few remains that were still available. Dog tags established that it was our guy.

The military had done a very classy thing. In their headquarters, they had put those remains in a child's casket, and had it set up in a separate room with a candle at each corner of it and an honor guard standing by it. It was quite touching. We cabled the Embassy that we would be off at dawn tomorrow and see if we could locate the site.

By 7 a.m., we were stopped at a ferry point on the Desaguadero River, which flows into Lake Titicaca, and couldn't get across. We honked to rouse the ferry operator from his little hut on the other side of the river. Nothing happened, nor did it when we fired guns into the air. About nine o'clock the ferryman emerged, knowing he was our only answer. In the interim there appeared a taxi from La Paz loaded with journalists who had heard about the plane crash and that there was something funny about it which the American Embassy was investigating. Remember we're at perhaps 13,000 feet, more than a hundred miles from the capital, in the middle of one of the more desolate areas on the globe and a taxi-full of reporters had tailed us.

We crossed the Desaguadero bemused and wondering what we were going to do. The cop from the station was saying, "Let the air out of their tires." Just on the other side, their taxi broke down. There ensued a great debate as to whether we should give them a ride. I prevailed in this and Pezzulo, as head of the mission supported me.

Of the thousands of flat square miles in the Altiplano, the U-2 had to come down on the side of a mountain. There was a little village at the base of the mountainside and it was these people who had gathered up the remains and debris.

It was quite obvious that something had crashed because their stone walls formed a kind of checkerboard on the side of the mountain, each square of perhaps a hectare. One square was blackened, where the plane had come down. The cop's contribution was,

Library of Congress

"These people have stolen pieces of our airplane." He wanted to line them up, shake them down, and get our airplane back. The contrary view fortunately held that, no, they hadn't stolen parts of our airplane, our airplane had ruined their crops. We left the equivalent of \$100 in Bolivianos with the head man of the village and said we would like to have as many pieces of our airplane and pilot back as they could possibly manage. We leave it up to you, we said, how to administer this. We asked if someone from the village would help guide us to the crash site.

We were interested mostly in the pilot and in whether the film had been exposed. After a miserable climb, we found pieces of everything everywhere, including the unfortunate pilot named Hicks, as I recall, and the film all over the mountain. I still have a piece of the airplane. When we came back down, late in the day, the people had gathered up a truckload of airplane parts. We said, "Hang onto it; we'll send somebody back for it." We got back into Oruro that evening, too late to go on to La Paz, and phoned the Embassy.

We arrived in the capital Sunday morning to headlines of "American Spy plane over Bolivia." My role in the pageant was to go to the editor and to try to settle him down. He was a man who had been born in the States, and had a lot of hang-ups and ambivalence about his relationship with the United States. Fortunately, for whatever reason, I was able to go to him, as somebody I knew, and say:

"Look, I can't tell you what the plane was doing, but it is not a secret that the US flies reconnaissance missions over Cuba. So let's just assume for purposes of argument that that's what he was doing. I can't tell you how high he was flying because I don't really know, but let's assume for purposes of argument that he was at about 90,000 feet. Now you know and I know that there is nothing in Bolivia that we might want a picture of from fifteen miles away. If we want a picture of anything, a military installation or whatever, I can hire one of your photographers for ten dollars after work and he'll take a picture of it from fifteen feet." He said that maybe that made some sense and, to my great relief, got off our back.

Library of Congress

It was a huge story there for awhile, but interestingly never made it into the national media in the United States.

The follow up to the story was that a few months later, we were at a reception at the Ambassador's residence and ran across a man who said that he was an anthropologist. Asked about his project, he said, "My project just got screwed up unimaginably and I've got to start all over again." It turned out that he was trying to do a piece of research on how people in isolated places got information about the world. He had chosen little village out in the far reaches of the altiplano, forty miles due west of Oruro, toward the Chilean border, as a place that really didn't have many sources of information about the outside world, so few that he could at least try to measure them. But a big bird falls out of the sky, the place was inundated with Air Force and other people from the United States, with money, and with Bolivian government interest that had never manifested itself there before. All of the dimensions to his study that he was interested in were completely laid to waste.

Q: Blew him off the Altiplano?

CHATTEN: Blew him and his project off the Altiplano. Weird story.

Washington, DC, Voice of America and Chief, Field Services Branch, Latin America

Q: You mentioned your following assignment was to Voice of America?

CHATTEN: Chief of the Field Services Branch. Interesting title.

Q: Would you go into that a bit and explain what you did and your reactions to working in the Voice of America.

CHATTEN: That era probably marked the high water mark of having Foreign Service people at the Voice, just as it was the high-water mark for a lot of other things in the Agency's history. There were four or five of us in the Latin American Division alone. As

Library of Congress

I've mentioned, that branch fed posts' ability to place programs on local radio throughout Latin America. This was one of the things which distinguished Latin America from developed countries in other parts of the world, where penetrating the local media often was very difficult. It also distinguished us from many parts of the developing world, where radio and television were very directly under the control of the Government. Radio and, subsequently, television in Latin America developed very much along the US model. It was developed commercially by businessmen and, while the Government was neither ignorant of nor ignored it, that was considered a normal way to develop. That created a phenomenon where the program managers and owners were looking for programming, and we had it. It was good programming in many ways and was able to fill a void, especially in countries where money was scarce and the ability to develop programs on your own was limited.

We were able to do some quite remarkable things. While in Bolivia, I had a disc jockey program once a week. Though partly for my amusement, it also was a bilingual DJ show, whose purpose was to promote Binational Centers. One of the guys in our radio shop would do a script every week around music that was popular at the time (Herman's Hermits comes to mind). We would transcribe the words to whatever was intelligible or clean enough and promote a "Song of the Week," "La Cancion de la Semana." We would distribute the words to these songs to the Binational Centers, announce on the air what the song of the week was going to be and tell people to go by the Binational Center to pick up the words. Then we would play it the following week and maybe the week after that and they could sing along, practicing their English all the while. It was a fascinating come-on in English teaching and proved to be an effective way of getting young people into the Binational Centers. It was fun, but it also illustrated how posts all over the hemisphere would take package programs from the Field Services branch of VOA and cut them up and use them in locally imaginative ways, as we had. "El Cancionero de Bob y Oscar," was replicated many times over with news related features and Americana or fed whole without

Library of Congress

post editing to the local stations. And this was a resource in the hands of posts throughout the hemisphere.

The thing that got the most attention was the production of dramatic radio shows, an idea whose time seems to have come again in the newly independent states of the former Soviet Union. And I'm amused every time I read about some USIS officer or some AID person in that part of the world saying, "Hey, we're promoting democracy out here. One of the things we really need is a radio soap opera that makes all of our points." Well, this was the business that I was in the mid-1960s. Some of our material was anti-Communist, but most of it was developmental, with a dose of American studies thrown in.

On the communist side, for example, we did a wonderful adventure show called "Entre dos Fuegos, a kind of "I Led Three Lives," in which our protagonist was a double agent operating out of Havana. We would produce all our soapers as half hour shows that could be divided into two fifteen minute shows, if that made them easier to place. We produced them so that the local station could insert commercials if they wanted. The basic format was a Monday to Friday serial. You would set forth the argument on Monday, develop it through the week and end on Friday, starting a new chapter the following week.

We produced these dramas with some absolutely wonderful people in the studio in the VOA office in the Federal Building in Miami. This was still early enough in the history of the exodus from Cuba that we had access to some wonderfully talented people, who had previously worked at CMQ, the flagship of Cuban radio and television, which was the most advanced radio and television in the hemisphere at the time Fidel came in. These people were past the stage of parking cars and pumping gas but they still were not yet at the stage where they owned banks and ran South Florida.

They wanted to work and so we were able to get, at a very reasonable price, some wondrously talented, experienced people to do these dramatic radio series that we were producing under the VOA rubric for placement overseas. It was exciting. You would see

Library of Congress

them all the way through, from idea to production to placement on three hundred radio stations throughout the hemisphere. It may have been the best job I ever had in the Agency. There was a great feeling of accomplishment. There was an actual product. You could see and hear what you were doing, and you knew it was being used. Certainly it was the most gratifying job I ever had around Washington.

Q: Many people, I think, Bob, agree that if you're not in a field post, working at the Voice with some direct relationship with the audience, is probably the most fulfilling job you can have in Washington.

CHATTEN: You bet! I think that the evolution of the relationship between VOA and the rest of the Agency has taken a very unfortunate turn in the decline of having Foreign Service people rotate in and out of the Voice. I think it was good for the Voice and I'm certain it was good for field people to know how it works and to have some input into drawing a closer relationship between the field and the Voice. The wheel has turned over there, interestingly, in recent years and they are very deeply into field placement of VOA programs, into the kind of thing that I used to do. I think that's a big plus because it forces a closer cooperation than they have had for a long, long time, between the Voice and the field.

Q: It sounds like two very successful years at the Voice. What transpired later?

CHATTEN: Some interesting consequences of the Voice experience occurred years later. In the short run, having my budget come from the area office kept my relationship with the area office very much alive. That was a real advantage. It sometimes used to frighten people to go over to the Voice because they feared they would lose their contact with an area office and thus with a patron for whatever their next assignment was. That wasn't true in my case. After I had been there for two years the possibility of doing something else began to loom, and I was asked by Area Director Bob Amerson, and Mose and other people what I wanted to do.

Library of Congress

Q: Lionel Mosley was the Personnel Chief of USIA.

UCLA - New Impressions

CHATTEN: I wanted to go back to the field, if I possibly could. I had touched most of the other bases in field jobs up to then, and so what I really wanted to do was be a country PAO in the biggest place that they would let me be a country PAO. This was much in the same vein as I had previously wanted to be a country IO in the biggest place that they would let me be a country IO. The competition, as always, was heavy. The opportunity came up to be Information Officer in Venezuela, where my old boss, Ed Schechter, was PAO, and I was asked if I wanted to do that. Thinking that it was a serious possibility, Pat and I worried the question to death, and finally came to the conclusion then, as we so often have at other times, to take the cash and let the credit go. If you've got something in hand, take it. And so I said, "OKAY, let's go to Venezuela."

At that stage, Mose had a change of mind. "We think it would be better for your career to have a University year at this juncture." Since the Latin American area office was a party to this deal, the idea was that I would study Latin American Affairs, in a graduate program, in anticipation of a return to the area.

I already had graduated from two of the universities that had top notch Latin American studies programs, New Mexico and Stanford, so I thought it probably was not a good idea to go back there. We ended up at UCLA during the 1969-1970 academic year, when all hell broke loose on campuses coast to coast. There was Kent State and Jackson State and the Cambodia incursion and raids on administration buildings by students and an excess of excitement. Angela Davis, for example, was a new instructor at the UCLA campus. It turned out to be, to say the least, an action-packed year.

I came to have quite a lot of sympathy for the students who were dissatisfied with academic life. In many institutions, UCLA among them, they weren't getting their money's

Library of Congress

worth. To find professors who were interested in teaching was a real task, even for someone with my exceptional freedom of movement. I was a degree student and did the classwork, though, not the dissertation, for another Masters Degree. In the course of this, I came to have a rather jaundiced view of a number of things in American academic life, along with a lot of appreciation for many of the good things. Among my findings was that very few people in Latin American studies were interested in the experiences of someone who had been right in the middle of the whole Che Guevara episode. Even less did they care to hear about the Peru of Hugo Blanco and an armed peasant movement This gave birth to considerable cynicism on my part as to how much people in the academic world really care about experience which might not fit into theory.

Among the most positive elements among the graduate students and junior faculty at UCLA, were the former Peace Corps volunteers. Among their peers, they were the least likely to subscribe to the goofy notion that everything wrong with the world is a consequence of either some action or inaction on the part of the United States. They had been on the ground abroad and tried to move foreigners and other societies in another direction. They knew that other peoples in other cultures don't take directions easily from American Government people and even less from well-meaning B.A. generalists. Former PCVs were a positive element in having a grip on the reality of international relations that I found very scarce among most graduate students and young staff.

In the spring quarter, demonstrations essentially closed UCLA down. Fortunately, by that time our ongoing assignment to Ecuador had come up and I had the enormous advantage of being able to concentrate on Ecuador. Research papers and reading that I was doing could be slanted toward it, a huge help in understanding the place that I was going.

I had been allowed to consider Deputy PAO Brazil or PAO Ecuador. And I had no hesitation about that. I reasoned that if I went to Brazil and did a smashing job as Deputy, I might be rewarded with the assignment of PAO to Quito. Let's just skip the intermediary step, if you don't mind, I said. Fortunately for me, it worked out that way.

Library of Congress

Q: Bob, just one last question with your University experience. Did you find that plug in with the students benefited your later assignments with better understanding of what was going on American campuses?

CHATTEN: Beyond any question. It was revealing in so many ways I can't even catalog them. It gave me a renewed feeling for what graduate student life, student life in general, is like on an American campus. I had been away from it for a few years, and it enabled me, as a PAO to interact even better with the cultural side of the programs that I came to direct. For example, in Ecuador I inherited the task of being chairman of the Fulbright Commission. I was able to do that job somewhat better by understanding some of the dynamics of student life and academic intellectual life on campus, which were open to me through this window.

The UCLA year was much better for me than it was for my wife, who had a hard time. We had been in some difficult places up to then and we had always concentrated upon the positive dimensions to a place. When you're assigned to the Bolivias of the world, and indeed some of the other places we had been, you can't let yourself be overcome by the negative part of it, or you'll be very unhappy indeed at home and ineffective on the job. And so we always had approached very positively any place that we had been assigned. But in Los Angeles, it's easy to forget that the same rules might be useful there. In a sense we were living well, in Pacific Palisades, which is a high option end of Los Angeles. But two moves within one year, with two young boys was asking a lot. She was having a hard time dealing with the fact that with all of her experience in Latin America and speaking Spanish well, and with experience and credentials as a teacher, she couldn't get work in the educational system in Los Angeles County. About a third of the way through the year we were able to arrive at an analogy between this assignment and the earlier assignments. Once you start coming at Los Angeles as another Bolivia, or at least another foreign assignment, it puts a different spin on it.

Library of Congress

The City of Angels wasn't a stroll in the park for anybody, but going on from there to Ecuador was big boost. Getting into the PAO game after having worked for eleven PAOs led to a number of conclusions about, what's good and what's bad, what you want to emulate and eliminate. PAOs, like everybody else, form a bell shaped curve, from outstanding ones to ones who make you wonder how they find their way to the office.

Ecuador - PAO

Q: You're very right there, Bob, and I think all former PAOs would agree with you. What were some of your highlights in Ecuador? How did you see your program shaping up and how would you rate the effectiveness of that program?

CHATTEN: It was a program, targeted to the circumstances of the time. We arrived there just when the long search for petroleum in the eastern jungles of the country had paid off. American petroleum countries which had leases to explore for oil had come up with significant discoveries. Texaco and Gulf had a consortium of equal partnership, with Texaco as the operating partner. That, as it turned out, was a complication. They were in the midst of building a pipeline over the Andes to a loading facility on the north coast of Ecuador, with an investment of millions in a small country.

The relationship with Ecuador during the two years we were there, from '70 to '72, was essentially colored by two things: oil and tuna.

There was the presence in Ecuador of this huge American extractive industry, pouring money into the country, being extraordinarily visible, with a lot of people whose culture and whose outlook on the world was formed in the oil patch of East Texas, Louisiana, and Oklahoma. If you transpose that culture and world onto the central Andes, you can get sometimes amusing, but often complicating results. Most of their children attended the missionary school, where they were strong on the 3 Rs corporal punishment, and whatever it took to make sure the "young guns" got an education. Not all bad by any

Library of Congress

means, it was achieved to some extent at the expense of the traditional American School, which Galo Plaza had helped found in the early '40s and which had been one of the great transforming elements of the education system of the country. There was another US supported school in the middle of the spectrum, which most Embassy kids attended.

The demonstration effect that these foreign schools, international schools, were having upon society was an interesting sidebar to the prevailing climate in which we worked. It was but one of the elements deriving from an overwhelming American corporate presence, and prospects of oil wealth dancing in Ecuadorian heads.

There is no way that you can make a large investment in an extractive industry in a third world country, in a developing country, more than intellectually palatable. It is always going to come on as a rape of the natural riches of the people and the motherland. One of the great challenges to the post was working with the oil companies and their staffs and management to the American presence there as well understood and as palatable and constructive as possible. And at the same time, we had to work with elements of Ecuadorian society to get them to understand that US development of their resources represented a unique opportunity for them. If they left the petroleum in the ground, they would not have this opportunity to use the income from it for their own good, however they defined that. In a developing country, and most assuredly in Ecuador, you have a world of unrealistic expectations when you can become a member of OPEC. The government entered into a program of spending the money before they had it, of going into debt on the premise that they were going to pay it back later. There was great reason for concern that things could go sour, with the oil companies, and by extension, the United States, getting blamed.

So there was this very yeasty mix in the relationship between the two countries at the time that consumed a great deal of everyone's energies, not just USIS, but everybody else there.

Library of Congress

The other eccentric element in the mix was the fact that the so called Tuna Wars were at their peak. The Ecuadorians, feeling expansive, had declared a two hundred mile “patrimonial sea.” The question of whether they had sovereignty over two hundred miles, which is by definition inviolable, or whether they had jurisdiction over two hundred miles, which makes it kind of negotiable, became a huge issue. It arose constantly, because every time a boat from the American fishing fleet, based primarily in San Diego, would get inside two hundred miles, the Ecuadorians would seize it. And they would bring it into port at Guayaquil or some place on the coast. The Americans would pay the fine, the Ambassador would trot off and present another protest at the foreign office and a TV crew would be invited into my office. I would sit behind the desk with the US flag behind me, and espouse what the US policy was. This itself, recycled itself over and over again for the whole two years we were there.

Oil and Tuna

Oil and tuna had a dramatic impact upon the USIS program, as well as other topics. We got involved in bringing in people who had lived through these kinds of developmental experience in other countries, both Americans and foreigners. They could talk about it in a dispassionate fashion, describing what's involved in the developmental end of it, what's involved in the cultural, social, political end of it, and what might constitute a reasonable way of approaching the subject. IVs we sent to the United States, no matter what their subject, always went through San Diego, where they could sit down with the officials of the American Tuna Boat Association for a frank and open dialogue.

Q: And get a tuna dinner? Ecuador has always had a very interesting Binational Center program and I was wondering if you'd like to expand on that a bit.

Binational Centers

Library of Congress

CHATTEN: It consumed a major part of the time that I devoted to duty in Ecuador and, in Guayaquil, was a major part of the program. Someone a few years before I arrived in Quito had received, I'm sure, the highest possible commendation for locating a big, new, nine story BNC building right across the street from the university. By the time I got there, the Binational Center had been bombed out of that building and it was an enormous albatross, a huge drain on resources because the building wasn't paid for. And while it was a local entity, we were deeply involved during the whole course of my stay there in trying to unload that white elephant. It was big enough to be a government ministry in Ecuador, but even this most logical category of buyer was not interested in being that close to the National University either, for the same reasons that we didn't have any business being there. You can imagine that at one time, this was thought of as being wonderfully close to the center of academic life in Ecuador. The students would just be able to go right across the street. But the law of unintended consequences took over and it became a terrible mistake.

In Guayaquil, however, we had long since outgrown an old building. There was a big market for English teaching in this largest and most dynamic of Ecuadorian cities, plus, we thought, a considerable market for the kinds of library and cultural programming that in a well-ordered society you're able to conduct out of a binational center. We were able to get good support from the American business community, adding them and other upbeat leaders to the Board of Directors. The big branch post and Consulate General put together a package that was appealing for a long term loan to build a big, new building there. We put a lot of energy into it. Branch CAO Jack Parker and PAO Jack Gallagher were very effective promoters, and I was back and forth to Guayaquil a good bit on that one.

I haven't been in Guayaquil in a number of years, but I know that for a considerable period after my 1970 to '72 time, it was really a showplace and a center for a lot of things that could be done to the benefit of US interests in Guayaquil and commercial activity in the

Library of Congress

country. It was a big, hot, ugly, dirty, tropical port city and smelled and looked the part. But it also was the country's center of business and trade.

Beyond the oil and the tuna boat program concerns that I've already mentioned, relations between the US and Ecuadorian governments often were contentious over the presence there of the US Military Group. During my second year there, the government decided to throw the MilGroup out of the country. Because of my contacts with the press corps covering the presidency, and the presidential press secretary, I was the first one in the Mission to know when the president and the cabinet had taken this decision. Keep in mind that Ecuador at that time was one of a number of Latin American countries in which the Secretary of Defense was far and away the most important person in the cabinet. (That was an important distinction between Ecuador and Colombia, where I went next.) So I had the task of telling the Ambassador he didn't have a MilGroup any more.

That mucked things up for awhile and drew a great deal of huffing and puffing from Washington. Fortunately the USG kept its head and we went on about what were more important dimensions to our business there. But, for a while, it certainly created a public affairs climate and at least a short term problem that consumed all of our attention and resources.

Surprise Assignments to Colombia

We were getting ready to round trip in Quito after two years, to go on home leave and come back when Area Director Darryl Carter flew in with the news that changed everything. As I took him from the plane into the terminal he said, "Congratulations, you're the new PAO in Bogota. You do want to go to Colombia, don't you?" But he said it in that order. We had invited the staff to our house to meet him and he was staying with us, so we went straight from the airport home. I was just barely able to whisper to Pat, "We're going to Bogota" before attending to the guests. She was standing on one foot and then on the

Library of Congress

other for two hours until we got the other people out the door and got the chance for him to fill us in.

Ambassador Leonard Saccio in Bogota, who had been an AID career person, decided that he was going to clean house. In one of the most impressive sweeps I've ever seen, within three months he got rid of his DCM, bringing Bob White from DCM Managua to fill that slot, and his administrative counselor, a high profile station chief, and PAO Darryl Drucker. Drucker had no prior experience in Latin America. He had been deputy PAO in India and had held the place together after Dan Oleksiw was thrown out by Ambassador Daniel Patrick Moynihan, and had been acting PAO for a long time. As a reward for those labors was put into what turned out to be a meatgrinder in Bogota

Q: At that point did you have to pack your bags?

CHATTEN: They let us go on home leave. Bureaucratically, the most impressive part of the house cleaning was that Saccio replaced the flamboyant Station Chief, a college chum of William Buckley, with someone who in the Central American wars of the 1980s, became even more well known, Nestor Sanchez. When we went through Bogota years before on our way to our first Latin American assignment in Lima, it had appeared to be a gray place, with gray people, and gray skies. Maybe we just caught it at a bad time on the earlier visit or maybe all those intervening years in Latin America had changed our perspective on what places look like, but it turned out to be a place of very congenial people who received us almost embarrassingly well. Four years there was our longest assignment anyplace and a kind of golden time.

We had the benefit of a number of people on the staff who were absolutely outstanding and who later went on to bigger things. BPAO Mike O'Brien, IO Greg Farmer, and AIO Chuck Loveridge became conspicuously successful Country PAOs. Bogota BNC Director Sally Grooms became both a PAO and Ambassador to Trinidad and Tobago. Sidney Hamolsky was and continued in other big posts to be the prototypical CAO.

Library of Congress

We also had an environment in which some very useful things could be done. As opposed to most places in Latin America, the Colombians had remarkably few hang ups about their relationship with the United States, which was a huge asset for us, of course. It had a lot to do with the fact that we were not the dominant force in their international trade, It was not the tourist Mecca with attendant pluses and minuses it often entails. US extractive industries did not have an overwhelming presence. And the history of the relationship, while not totally felicitous, was certainly a lot healthier than it had been in other places. Most important in the light of subsequent developments, we were there only in the earliest stages of the drug business, though it seemed big to us at the time.

Ambassador Saccio's left about six months into our stay, to be replaced by Pete Vaky, then in the early stages of well-deserved ARA stardom.

Early Drug Programming

Q: What kind of programming did you people develop when you saw the birth of the drug industry or at least the early stages of it?

CHATTEN: We did a number of things. One of them was to determine how much assistance we could get from Washington in putting together media and speaker programs and other kinds of educational and outreach efforts. We learned that it wasn't easy. It's hard to believe in terms of subsequent developments but it was perceived in Washington as our local problem. Our biggest asset was an Area Office that said "OKAY, you're the PAO. Go ahead and spend your program resources the way local circumstance dictate." If I could justify something on those terms, I could do it, but I got precious little institutional support from USIA.

Drug trade did not skew everyone's attention upon Colombia, as it later did and so there were still healthier things that you could talk about. There came to be a time in which you couldn't mention Colombia in Washington without first dealing with drugs. This

Library of Congress

engendered a great deal of negativism about the whole nature of the relationship, and came to dominate everything. We didn't have later levels of security problems pressing down upon our physical presence. That was before we closed down operations in other cities.

When we went, there were class A binational centers in Cartagena, Barranquilla, Medellin, Cali, and Bogota. This put officers in key places all around the country, and we were able to approach Colombia from a somewhat broader base.

I could still come and go freely from downtown, and walk into the offices of newspaper editors with whom we had very cordial relationships. Even though ultimately I came to need a bodyguard in our last years there, it was a very different atmosphere than in Colombia of a few years later.

Now to answer your question of what did we focus on. We often were able to deal with more hemispheric level problems. The foreign office there had assumed a position of leadership and, for better or for worse, Henry Kissinger developed a kind of simpatico relationship with the foreign minister. As you know, that's a two-edged sword and so we occasionally saw more of Kissinger than most people might want to. But even when Bill Rogers was Secretary, someone got the unfortunate idea he should address all of Latin America from the Colombian legislature. Think about it for a minute. The Secretary can make it only to Bonn, but he's going to address England, France, and the rest from there. He's in Tokyo, so he might as well speak to China and ASEAN from the Diet. We were able to keep people focused on the good side of that as opposed to the down side, at least in Colombia. As in Ecuador, I was chairman of the Fulbright Commission and spent a good bit of time trying to make sure that we kept our scarce resources focused on the more important faculties of the more important universities. The dilemma is familiar in most places: do you want a few US professors and researchers for an extended period of time, or do you get more people and more exposure in more places but for a shorter, less

Library of Congress

enduring exposure? We went for breadth over depth and tried to make it up with intensity. It often worked, though not always and it wasn't easy.

Lesser support to Binational Centers

Q: Let me interject a question here. Between 1972 and 1976 the period you were in Colombia, it seems to me that was the period when the Agency was starting to withdraw from very active support to the Binational Center movement in Latin America. I know it was taking place in Brazil and other parts of Latin America.

CHATTEN: It hit us too, and we knew that we were swimming against the tide. We reached the very conscious policy decision to conduct most of our cultural programming from or in the name of the BNCs. This took advantage of, and helped perpetuate, the centers' substantial local credibility. With the support, or at least the acquiescence, of the Area Office, we were able to spend GOE resources on supporting them in one way or another. Occasionally, we were able to get some relatively modest, but nevertheless new, grant money from the Agency. Whatever our contribution, it always was augmented by local support, often quite substantial and coming from important people in local communities, Colombian and American.

Cartagena probably was the biggest problem with our class A centers and it was downgraded to class B, that is to say, one without a USIS officer on loan.

Agency resources were shrinking all over and the pullback from our investment in binational centers was just part of the overall drawdown. Certainly it continued in Colombia, just as it had hit me within weeks after I got to Ecuador. In my time in the PAO business I was continually being asked by somebody in Washington to cut resources, cut program and, the part that weighed the heaviest upon me, fire employees. The cumulative effects of that probably figured as much as anything in my ultimate decision to retire when I did. I was just tired in job after job of having to fire people. It really got to me.

Library of Congress

Q: I can identify with that.. Being in the milieu of reducing resources is very difficult.

Media Seminars

CHATTEN: The Colombian experience also was very good because of the history of post relationships with media there and our ability to continue doing useful, and occasionally innovative, things with them. CU/ARA in those days was headed by an old friend, Max Chaplin, who in the fashion of CU reserved a lot of resources to be spent on regional projects. Working together and with other PAOs, we were able to put together a series of regional media seminars that turned out to be extraordinarily beneficial. They resulted in a lot of coverage of subjects we cared about in the national media in Colombia. They also helped cement our relationship with the leadership of the national media, building crisis capability an access that allowed us in unanticipated circumstances to cash in some chips.

These Regional seminars allowed me to take four of my closest associates in the media, one of the co-directors of El Tiempo, the most important newspaper in the country, one of the top editors from El Espectador, the largest circulation newspaper in the country, the head of the government TV network, and the presidential press secretary to Stanford for a week. The program that incorporated people at that level from all over Latin America, bringing them together with high level colleagues and contemporaries from the United States. Michener, for example, was a participant. And he didn't just show up and speak. He was around for awhile and we really got a chance to interact. At the Stanford end was Lyle Nelson, former chairman of Communications and Journalism at Stanford, who had been head of the Board of Foreign Scholarships Latin American operations. He went on to be head of the BFS.

These programs worked enormously to our benefit. We had another, similar one run by the University of Maryland, to which I was able to take four more of my top media contacts. Former LBJ Press Secretary George Reedy, then professor of journalism at Marquette, was the main cog in the Maryland Seminar.

Library of Congress

Q: Was this 1974, Bob?

CHATTEN: Probably.

Q: Because I brought four people from Brazil.

CHATTEN: You were there. And it was exactly the kind of thing that CU and USIA and USIS did at their best. That kind of cooperation and field input made for short term and long term good for USIS and US interests wherever you were. Because of the experience of those two seminars we were able to keep the ball rolling with a third one in Caracas with media people from Venezuela and Colombia. It was set up by PAO Jack Higgins and IO Yale Newman. Again, I was able to spend a week in close professional and personal contact with a group of my very best media contacts, including another presidential press secretary. Yale had been a first class media person in his own right, before he came into the Agency, and was able to get Eric Sevareid, Pierre Salinger and Helen Thomas from the United States.

Both we and the Venezuelan Government put up money. While we, in fact, selected the participants, they came at the invitation of the Venezuelan Government. It marked a kind of Golden Age in cooperative interaction that I don't recall having seen duplicated other times and other places. It may just have been unique to the time and place. I don't know.

Partly because of that, and partly because I had been in the area for a long while, our approach to people and programs came to the attention of the front office of the Agency. Jim Keogh eventually asked me to be Area Director at the conclusion of our four years in Colombia. Nothing in the bureaucracy is ever done for just one reason. Colombia marked for me the high point in USIS operations which were integrated within the post, within the mission and with the people who had responsibility for supporting us from Washington. You could superimpose upon that whatever the issues at the moment were.

Library of Congress

Q: There's no doubt about it in my mind Bob that you were exercising the flexibility that the Agency offered at that time. This was later to become a more rigid. And you certainly, with these media programs, affected a lot of people through the Gatekeepers. Now, as you wind up in Colombia and Jim Keogh asked you to be Area Director, how did you address the new challenge?

Area Director

CHATTEN: It was terribly exciting. The subject had come up periodically in terms of the possibility of my going up as Deputy, or Area Director, but that's the kind of thing that happens, you don't make it happen. It either does or it doesn't. I had been by then an AIO, an ACAO, a Country IO and a PAO twice, beside service in the Latin American division of the Voice and grounding in area studies. The threads of these experiences gave me a lot of useful perspective on what was possible and necessary in the field, and on what field people were like, both personally and programmatically. I was really lucky in that I had a lot of friends in the field who became the Area Office's constituency and whose interests I was going to advocate and defend.

As you know, it was an interesting moment in the history of the Agency spanning the last year of the Keogh administration and of the Republicans in the White House, followed by the John Reinhardt era. Most of us were sorry to see Jim and his Deputy, Gene Kopp, go, but we, initially thought this was going to be another good chapter in the history of the Agency.

John Reinhardt and Charlie Bray Off Course

How could it fail, we thought, with the first ever, USIA career person as Director. I think that we all were victimized by unrealistic expectations about John. We trusted his decision to choose the right person as Deputy in Charlie Bray, which turned out to be bad analysis in the extreme. And I think we underestimated the impact that John's time in

Library of Congress

the State Department as an Assistant Secretary and Ambassador had had upon his field perspective. All in all, it turned out to be a very mixed bag.

Q: You made a general statement about the direction of the Agency by John Reinhardt. Where do you think, in your experience as Area Director for Latin American, that John veered wrongly?

CHATTEN: First of all, John saw fit to downgrade the importance of the media, though he wouldn't touch the Voice of America. John, came out of an academic background and clearly his greatest, long term, institutional impact upon the Agency was bringing CU into USIA. Given that there were loud voices at the time advocating the reintegration of USIA into State, I don't for a moment underestimate the importance of the CU merger or of John's protecting and defending the institutional interests of the Agency in Washington.

The flip side of that was that he did not focus on the field and I still looked upon myself as essentially a field-oriented person. What we saw during this period was a deterioration, I think, in the goods and services that were going to the posts. We saw a continued shrinking of the budget which I don't know whether John could have influenced. He chose not to seek a seat on the National Security Council, which predecessors of his had. That denied him an important opportunity to advocate and defend the institutional interests of the Agency at that level. It also meant that foreign public opinion did not get factored into a vital stage of the policy process. We were not, to paraphrase Murrow, in on the takeoffs - only the crash landings. For whatever reason, we had a shrinking of resources and a front office turning its back upon the kind of media operations in which Latin America was particularly adept.

All this was compounded by his extremely unfortunate choice of Charlie Bray, who had been John's deputy when he was Assistant Secretary of State for Public Affairs.

Library of Congress

Q: Charlie was the Deputy to the Assistant Secretary for Public Affairs at State, wasn't he, and Spokesman, when John Reinhardt brought him over as his deputy.

CHATTEN: He may have been elevated to be both Spokesman and Assistant Secretary but he came to us. I'm not certain what Charlie was doing at that moment. He had certainly been Bill Roger's spokesman and indeed that's how I first met him when he came to Bogota with the Secretary.

Q: How did Charlie then harm the Agency? Or better put, how did he harm the program?

CHATTEN: I won't attempt to be exhaustive on the subject. Charlie and I talked a lot and saw a lot of each other. The continuing argument that I had with him was that USIA in Washington and the field is a program agency. What it is involved in is taking the product of analysis, however and by whomever it is produced, and saying, "OKAY, if that is the situation, what are we going to do about it?" I don't think Charlie ever made the leap from his State Department upbringing, where analysis and its articulation ARE the product. The product for us had to be programmatic. The product for Charlie was in concocting clever descriptions of things. He and I went on about this at considerable length.

He and John had the notion that there were personnel "clubs." One of his favorite targets was what he looked upon as the Latin American Club. One of John Reinhardt's favorite targets was the European Club of USIA officers who had been recycled over and over again, in and out of those posts. He looked upon it in somewhat the same way Kissinger did, in another era, as being so ingrown that they couldn't see the forest for the trees, that they were forever trying out things that had been done before, or rejecting things because they hadn't worked before. I didn't think the rap was true, certainly not across the board, despite the fact that we did have a number of old Latin American hands in the field and some in Washington as well.

Library of Congress

The question became whether experience, area expertise and language facility were detrimental. I did some real looking for ways in which that might have been a weight around our necks in terms of what kind of programming we undertook and how we addressed the issues. The front office would not be mollified. Among the new people in the White House, we had considerable attention focused upon Latin America. The First Lady, who had been to Brazil on a people to people program, was to be dispatched on a trip around the area to report back to her husband. This was a kind of curious reflection of Milton Eisenhower's doing the same thing early in his brother's Administration or Nelson Rockefeller's two trips. Rockefeller, you'll recall, earlier had been Inter-American Coordinator for FDR and Milton Eisenhower became a University President, so there was precedent. But it had this Carteresque twist. The only times that I have been in the family quarters of the White House were when I was given the opportunity to help prep Mrs. Carter. We concentrated on how we thought she would be received and on what the Latinos would want to talk about. She didn't take all of our advice.

I pointed out, for example, that human rights could be a wonderful framework for positive US relationships with many countries in the area. But I continued that whenever she talked about human rights, as she was certainly inclined to do, it would be most useful to refer to it as the United States' policy toward Latin America and not hearken only to "Jimmy's policy." She couldn't make that leap. She was too political an animal, and too single minded in her devotion to her husband's political well being. I'm unaware if she ever was able to talk about it as anything other than "Jimmy's Human Rights Policy". I admired her in many ways. She was and is smart and a hard worker. I came onto her later in Thailand and again got rather close to the First Lady and her staff when she was there on refugee related business.

Meanwhile, the USIA front office's focus upon uprooting vestiges of the regional "clubs," and bringing in what they looked upon as "hybrid vigor", became terribly important to them. Charles Bray was a prime mover in all of this. I was certainly guilty of telling John

Library of Congress

and Charlie things that they didn't want to hear about Latin America, about the nature of our programs and of our problems there. One very particular example was how we ought to make sure that we were getting our resource base in line with the fact that drugs were rapidly becoming an important dimension in United States' relations with the whole area. I didn't incorporate Mexico into my arguments at that time, though it later came unfortunately to be true. I couldn't penetrate them, and I couldn't penetrate Allen Carter, then calling a lot of policy shots. They weren't having any of this or much of the other field-based advice to which Jim Keogh and Gene Kopp had been receptive.

Cataclysmic PAO Conference

Q: In the Agency lore, there was a cataclysmic PAO meeting which you were directing as Area Director for Latin America in which you and Charlie Bray clashed swords, which perhaps affected other elements of your career. Could you get into that just a bit?

CHATTEN: That was part of the folk hero stage of my life. We set up a PAO conference in Panama because the Canal Treaty was the huge regional issue of the day, as far as Latin America was concerned. Unlike drugs, I didn't have any trouble selling focus upon the treaty as important. Unlike previous and subsequent ways in which PAO conferences were set up, the whole agenda down to the minutest detail was exactly the kind of thing that Bray thought he ought to involve himself in.

When I finally was able to satisfy the Deputy that there ought to be a PAO meeting and to come up with a kind of negotiated agenda, the meeting turned into a kind of classic confrontation. My emphasis was on trying to get PAOs together into useful working groups on the business of turning policy and what John Reinhardt called communications tensions into programs. We had big country PAOs, Brazil and Mexico, in one cluster, with the Andean Group, Central Americans, and Caribbeans in others focusing upon drugs and common problems. The group as a whole was trying to come up with programmatic applications for human rights and the Panama Canal Treaty debate.

Library of Congress

The Bray confrontation grew from the fact that he really had very few innards for cross-cultural communications. It was of no discernible interest to him that he was dealing with a distinctive Agency field culture. His approach to it was to come on saying, "You guys and your staffs have been doing everything wrong up to now." Occasionally, he would mitigate that with "whatever it is that you've been doing in the past has no applicability today and tomorrow." "You're going to have to prove to me that whatever it is that you do is relevant," he'd say. Remember, you're dealing with a room full of people who are, if nothing else, good at cross cultural communications. If you can think of a way, in that context, to go about something in an unproductive manner, it's to go into a group and say, "you people are all screwed up. There's considerable doubt that you've ever done anything right in the past, but if you're going to be allowed to do anything at all in the future with us, then you've by God got to prove it to me in each instance." I'm persuaded that this was at the very least a manifestation of a lack managerial experience on Bray's part. He had been extremely successful as a State Department officer in Washington. His overseas experience was, as can be the case with State Department officers, minimal. He had been abroad as a very junior person in Cebu and perhaps one other post. He had spent the rest of his career in Washington's corridors of power, getting ahead with extremely adept talents at working that side of the street. But in dealing with foreigners in a USIA programmatic sense, he had precious little background. He had no experience or viscera for dealing with staffs in general, because you can go awfully high in the State Department and never manage anything more than a secretary. It was a classic misfit.

In his opening remarks, he started pounding on my people and I couldn't let it stand. I said that these people had been very successful in many instances. When they're good, they're very good, I pointed out, and when they're not we're in continual discussion about how we're going to make it better. This approach is relevant to the circumstances of both yesterday and today, I said, since we were gathered in Panama because it was the focus of US-Latin American relations at that time.

Library of Congress

As an example, I pointed out that Panama PAO Steve Dach was extraordinarily on top of all of the dimensions to the situation there, both from a policy point of view and in his relations with Bill Jorden, the Ambassador. He did a first class job of feeding information back to Washington and in dealing with the incredible international media attention that was attendant thereto.

I'm not sure that we even arrived at a point at which we agreed to disagree, but we most assuredly disagreed, in private and in public. He had showed me a copy of a draft of his opening remarks before he gave them and I said, "Charlie, you're going to get the wrong kind of reaction from this group if you say that."

In the telling and retelling of these tales, that PAO conference came to be known, within the area, and in some other parts of the Agency, as Latin American tugging on Superman's cape. Within a relatively short time after that, John Reinhardt, who had been a friend since we were in Japan together, found a solution to the problem of Bray and Chatten not singing from the same music. He called me in, saying all kinds of people had been proposed to him or had proposed themselves as PAO to Bangkok. None, he said, was as right for it as I.

There was some logic to this in terms of John being one of the people who had been around long enough to think of me as an East Asia hand, rather than as a Latin American type. Nevertheless, there's little doubt in my mind, and in most other people's, that they just needed to get me off the premises. We had an office despedida in which all of the people who had anything to do with Latin America were gathered. John was invited and came. Charlie was not invited and, interestingly enough, let it be known he would like to be invited. We didn't. I recited a poem at the despedida in which John's part in the decision to pull me out of Latin America and send me back to East Asia played a prominent role. That too became part of the lore. John did a smart thing after that, moving Vic Olason up from Deputy to Area Director. I think I was in what may have been the last generation of Area Directors who were given the courtesy of naming their deputies. If any has been able to

Library of Congress

do so since, I am unaware of it. Jim Keogh let me ask for Vic to be called out of Iceland, where he was on his first PAO assignment, to come back and be Deputy. And it was a good move politically at the moment and turned out to be in practice. Dachi was brought up from Panama to be his deputy and, when Vic left, moved on to be Area Director. A colorful one, he was.

Q: I know those were meaningful years for you and the Agency although you had been out of the Latin American area much of that time. I did hear about some of the rejuvenation going on in your support to the major programs which had proven themselves well over the years. Your approach, "if it ain't broke don't fix," added a little chrome and polish to a lot of the old standards plus coming in with some new ones.

Q: Can we jump now, through the one year of Thai Language Training?

CHATTEN: It seemed like it would go on forever, but I'm certainly content to let it be quick.

Q: Through the klongs of Bangkok.

CU Merges with USIA

CHATTEN: Sure, let's do it. First, let me give you one other thing about those times and then I'll happily go to Bangkok. The jewel in John Reinhardt's crown, and justifiably so, was fighting off all of the people who wanted to dissolve the Agency, the Stanton Commission and others, and to successfully incorporate CU into the Agency. Jim Briggs had replaced Max Chaplin as head of CU/ARA and he also was a close friend. We had worked very closely together. Briggs and I formed a close and useful alliance when we were building up to the incorporation. The plans that we put together as to how it ought to be done and how it ought to work, didn't fly. In retrospect, they might have.

We were trying to maintain some of the viability that CU had had in the development of programs. We wanted to incorporate a kind of program development staff into the

Library of Congress

new area offices. The idea was to regionalize program development to a much greater extent than had been the case in the Agency, carrying CU's concentration of area-specific resources and program staffs over to newly constituted area offices. To the extent possible these were to be the Washington Window on the posts and the posts' window on Washington.

As we know, most of CU's programs got incorporated into the brand new E. Bureau, together with bits and pieces of the Agency's previous ICS. I say bits and pieces because during the transition period, Alan Carter and Hal Schneidman were stripping the old ICS of everything that wasn't nailed down to go into their new P Bureau rather than allowing them to go to educational and cultural affairs.

What survived of the earlier good relations between the CU and USIA Latin American area offices were some outstanding people coming onto our staff, at least for a little while. Bob Persico comes immediately to mind. Now Thailand.

Refugees, Drugs, Downstream Vietnam

Q: What do you consider your highlights in Thailand and your focus and maybe lessons learned?

CHATTEN: Thailand's focus had to be refugees, drugs and the downstream consequences in general of the United States' involvement in Vietnam. If you were in Bangkok then, you had to. The Vietnamese Army, when I got there, had just swarmed into Cambodia, taking Phnom Penh and pushing the Khmer Rouge up against the Thai border.

Q: You had quite a plate full of issues, with tens of thousands of refugees coming in from Cambodia because of the Vietnam/Cambodia situation and the Khmer Rouge blood bath going on. All were a part of the downstream consequences of the Vietnam War. Drugs, of course, were high on your issue agenda. What part of your program would you like to start with?

Library of Congress

CHATTEN: Let me take it from the external environment in which we operated and then go to the USIS portion of it. Both become relevant.

On the external side, drugs had long been a factor in our relationship with the Thai and a lot of effort had gone into interdiction. We had what I understood was the world's largest DEA contingent and the station was deeply involved in drug related programming, devoting a lot of their resources to the collection of intelligence which later could be used by other people. Everybody got involved, one way or another. The Royal Family had its own very particular perspective on this, seeing the people who were growing poppies not only as Thai citizens, but also as loyal subjects who could not just be cut off. This meant that the growing of poppies had to be phased out gradually with the help of the government and the Royal Family. This is analogous to Bolivia, where the growing of coca, per se, was never outlawed. Crop substitution clearly couldn't be done overnight. Then you have all the cops and robbers dimensions to the thing. The war lords in the Shan Hills in Burma oversaw the growing and initial processing of the stuff and its transportation across Thai boundaries and across Thailand for export to Europe and the United States. That leaves the mission with a huge police function that has a military dimension to it, at least on the part of the Thai.

It was a job just trying to know what was going on, so that we could anticipate the public affairs dimensions and deal with the Thai Government, with which USIS had good relations.

There was a good bit of moving back and forth between people in the civilian government and the Thai academic community. This constituted an additional asset because of the extent to which the academic community looked toward the United States for leadership, inspiration, and peer interaction.

Our branch post operation in Chiang Mai was focused to an important degree upon the public affairs dimensions to the drug traffic. Harkening to earlier experience, we closed

Library of Congress

the Konkaen Branch post while I was there because of budget strictures. To a lesser, but important degree, Chiang Mai concentrated on the refugee program. The refugee effort dominated our attention in Bangkok, together with the whole geopolitical background against which it was played.

Mort Abramowitz, as Ambassador, was quite a remarkable show. Like Bray, he had scant experience overseas before becoming an ambassador, with but two early assignments abroad with the State Department. The rest of his very successful career had been in the aforementioned corridors of power in Washington. Unlike Charlie, he was outstanding among his colleagues in thinking programmatically. It was a good thing for the United States Government that he was in Thailand at that moment. He had sought assignment in Korea, and ended up with Thailand at a moment when refugees were swarming in and the Vietnamese Army was a four hour drive over flat terrain from Bangkok. Thailand was the so called "front line state" of ASEAN in those days, and important to its trade and economic development roots.

Thailand took perhaps the majority and certainly the largest slice of refugees from all of Indochina. Not only the Khmer were pouring across the border, victims of the war between the Khmer Rouge and the Vietnamese. The Vietnamese boat people were still coming across the Gulf of Thailand in large numbers, to be confined, by and large, to camps in the far south of the country. But the largest contingent, by a sizable margin, were Lao. They did not have the drama of the Viet boat people or of the famine and killing fields of Cambodia, but they nevertheless constituted the largest single group of refugees in Thailand. Each ethnic group was treated very differently.

Everybody in the mission and practically every program in the mission had a refugee dimension superimposed upon it in one way or another. My eldest son, as an example, who had just graduated from college, came to Thailand with us as a graduation present. He immediately was offered a job in the refugee program, where he ended up spending two years. The first year he was a case worker in a huge camp in Nongkhai, right across

Library of Congress

the Mekong from Vientiane. The second year, back in Bangkok, he became the head of the lowland Lao program. This was a huge piece of business, and a huge responsibility for a twenty-three year old. It was a life changing experience, having the responsibility of making the life and death decisions, that as a case worker often come before you as you try to find out whether someone really is eligible for immigration to the United States. Immigration and Naturalization people made the final decisions, but this often was no less serious than deciding who was to see INS.

This was a very bright, very serious young man, and it made a big difference in his life. This must be evocative of your own experience with your own son (Jeff Coffey) having done similar things when he came to Thailand. When he was in Bangkok, of course, he stayed at our house. It was a life changing experience, not only for the young people but for a lot of us.

My younger son, a senior in high school at the time, instead of going on a "senior sneak" to the beach, went out to the Cambodian border and worked in a camp. It was during the height of the Cambodian flood, and so he would take people who undoubtedly would be dead the next day to the French or the Israeli doctors who were set up in a field tent there trying to save people. Refugees were at the heart of a large part of what we were doing.

One of the things that it meant was considerable frustration on the part of the AID mission director and me, whose resources and ability to program essentially stopped at the Thai border. Remember, we're dealing with an embassy in which the ambassador looked upon himself essentially as Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Continental Southeast Asia. Mort Abramowitz was not about to think only in terms of Thailand. Indeed, Dick Holbrooke, who was Assistant Secretary at the time, looked upon Abramowitz in exactly that way. And we saw a lot of Holbrooke in and out of Thailand. After more than a little contact with him, I came to be an admirer of what a very smart guy he is. Notwithstanding the ego for which he is known, he was certainly appropriate to that time and place, as was Abramowitz. The DCM focused, naturally as an extension of Abramowitz's broad views of his tasks. To get

Library of Congress

to those who concentrated primarily upon Thailand, per se, you had to look to the political counselor and me and a few others.

The much broader regional considerations, of course, were what brought an average of probably a CODEL a week. A huge, time-consuming portion of our energies went into briefing these people, taking them back and forth to the border, seeing to it that their needs and expectations were either met or illuminated by what we considered informed perspective, whatever that was. And of course, Rosalynn Carter came. Partly as a consequence of the Mission's refugee dimensions, CBS Reports came and did an hour-long piece which was called, "Embassy," ironically so because it dealt primarily with Mort Abramowitz.

Q: I recall seeing that.

CHATTEN: The irony was compounded because a few years before there had been another network special, I think on NBC, called "Ambassador" and its focus was on the embassy. At any rate, it was the kind of thing in which USIS played a significant part, and in which everyone was constantly running to keep up with the events as they unfolded every day.

Cutting Resources

Let me talk a little about the internal dimensions to operation, because they became terribly important. The Washington support for USIS/Thailand was not remotely as focused upon our program priorities as we had to be, or thought they should be. They were concentrating upon more administrative worries like their desire to cut field staff, which we had to do at every turn. This was greatly compounded by the fact that John Reinhardt had given Alan Carter another area directorship to play with, for whatever strange reason he chose to do this. Many of us, I think, believed that for some of the same reasons that I got myself back to East Asia, John wanted to get Alan out of his hair. For whatever reason, we were dealing constantly with an antagonistic Area Office which refused to accept our

Library of Congress

program analysis and priorities, in terms of how we ought to be expending our resources. They were continually after us to cut staff and resources. This got Mort Abramowitz's attention and brought him into conflict with the USIA Area Office. He was openly very critical of Carter's office in his communications with the State Department EA bureau as well as openly critical of it in his dealings with Alan.

As a consequence, I spent just two years in Thailand, after having anticipated being there for four. Those two years lurched along in three-month crunches. One month would be focused upon the need to cut staff and resources because the Area Office had told us that we had to do it. The next month would be in making the cuts and firing people and curtailing some program that we were doing. The next month would be spent sweeping up after it and trying to get our resource base fixed under us so that we could go on about our business. Then the cycle would begin again. It sounds like an exaggeration, but it is not. We went through these three month cycles time after time.

Part of the reason was a consequence of inevitable pressures of having to cut somewhere, something, in an era of shrinking USIA resources. Part of it was a consequence of Thailand having been the second largest post in the world during the height of the Vietnam War. In 1967, which was the high water mark for the Agency in terms of resources in relative terms, Thailand had 54 officers and 13 branch posts. It had heaven knows how many FSNs. After the 1975 US withdrawal from Vietnam, the EA area office reasonably concluded: "Well, the circumstances are different, let's take resource cuts out of Thailand." I just happened along at a time when USIA Washington had made a habit of this, cutting time and again without sober reflection of what had become of the one-time huge operation.

When I left Thailand after two years there in 1981, we had arrived at a position in which I had fewer resources as PAO than I had when I arrived in Ecuador as PAO in 1970. I had less GOE, I had fewer people on my staff, I had less flexibility in what I was able to do with those resources. It was quite remarkable.

Library of Congress

Abramowitz and Carter got into it because Abramowitz and I were proposing to reorient the staff toward programming on the refugee problem and the new realities facing the US in Southeast Asia. Everybody in the region was in the refugee business. You (Fred) in Indonesia were, as they were in the Philippines and Hong Kong and Malaysia and Singapore. It was important for us, as we discussed at our regional PAO meeting, that we get on top of how USIS field operations needed to face the problems. Carter was having none of it. We could not remake the staff in that fashion, we could not devote an officer to coordinating our programs. For better or worse, I was the USIS refugee coordinator and the deputy PAO was the internal coordinator keeping body and soul together in the post. The Thai print media did not impact heavily upon the actions of the government or the military. We concentrated a bit more on the electronic media, though in most cases they were more a carrier of the message rather than a front line group of people who were active participants in the management of the country, as they had been in Colombia for example.

We finally got to the point where, of the nine Americans on the staff, four of us were in the front office: PAO, deputy, exec and secretary. To the Ambassador and to the Area Office, I said, "This doesn't make any sense whatsoever. We've got to get some people out there where the rubber meets the road, there are too many people in the front office around here."

At that time, the exec was leaving and so I proposed to Washington that we not replace him. Hal Morton was deputy PAO, with experience as an exec, and we had a good FSN administrative staff so were able to count on them for some realistic support. There was a post management assistance officer who could supplement Morton's very real strengths if we needed it. So I said let's not replace the executive officer and instead get ourselves another information officer to do some of the things that need doing.

Library of Congress

"Well, golly, I don't know," says Washington, "after all, we've already assigned someone else."

So, I go to plan B, and say, "All right, if you insist on replacing the exec, then let's get rid of the deputy's slot. We've got to get more people on the line and fewer in the front office. Take Morton, I said, who had been there about a year at the time, and who had been a country PAO, who clearly needed to be a country PAO again in order to get the best out of him, or take me. I'm coming up on two years here. Mexico is going to come open one of these days, get me to Mexico. And that's what they ended up doing.

Chief of Foreign Service Personnel

Was pulling me out a smart thing to do? Form a personnel management point of view, probably not. From a personal perspective, it's harder to say. I likely would have gotten to Mexico anyway, and I wasn't eager to leave East Asia, only its eccentric USIA management. Personnel Director Angie Garcia phoned me and said, "Would you be interested in being Chief of Foreign Service Personnel until Mexico comes open which is supposed to be in a year." I said yes. And that's what we ended up doing. That's not the ideal way to run a personnel operation and the best you can say about it under the circumstances was that I did have credibility with field officers. If they didn't get what they wanted out of personnel, at least my being there might lend some credibility to personnel having done what it could for them, even if it couldn't do what they wanted.

It was a terrible time to be in that job. Beyond Angie, with whom I had very good relations, was the erratic political leadership: Jim Hackett as Associate Director for Management, Gil Robinson as deputy director of the Agency, Charlie Wick as Director. And everybody wanted to have a hand in senior and often other assignments. In addition to the kinds of things that you normally are expected to do in personnel counseling and assignment, I continually had to deal with a mechanism that had been set up in which bodies would be deposited on my doorstep of very senior, experienced officers who were out of favor.

Library of Congress

The word would be "Get them out of sight. Get them out of harm's way." Bad as that was, it was complicated by the fact that getting a senior officer out of harm's way could not incorporate putting them into another senior officer slot.

It was absolutely dreadful. People would ask me how it was going, I'd say, "How did Lieutenant Calley like My Lai?" Personnel atrocities were committed regularly.

Aiming for Mexico - Senior Seminar

At the conclusion of a year, PAO Zuckerman was supposed to leave Mexico. Wanting desperately to stay, he had thrown himself on the Ambassador's mercy and was told that, "Yes, you could stay for a fifth year." USIA management acceded. I really didn't have the stomach for doing it longer, if I had any alternatives. The answer to the dilemma was the Senior Seminar, a classic case of doing the right thing for the wrong reasons, a phenomenon in which life in Washington abounds. I knew I was taking the chance that Stan Zuckerman would get on the dark side of Ambassador Jack Gavin again, as he and many others in the Mission had. It was very easy to get on the dark side of Ambassador Jack Gavin in those days and get yourself thrown out of the country, quietly and unceremoniously. And if that were to happen in the middle of my senior seminar year I was going to be SOL for going to Mexico. It didn't. Whenever I did a Seminar study, or a paper, or I interviewed people and did my research project, I was able to focus it upon Mexico. It turned out to be an enormous benefit, a great leg up for me when I finally got there.

PAO Mexico

Q: Which was approximately what year, Bob?

CHATTEN: I was in Mexico from 1983-1985. Again, the externals and the internals of that were unique. I thought then and I think now that PAO to Mexico is the Ph.D. course in PAO studies, certainly for the area but maybe worldwide. Unlike relations with some of the

Library of Congress

other places that matter a lot to us, there is no end to the dimensions of the relationship. There is no major US domestic problem - education, agriculture, drugs, crime, welfare, you name it - that does not have a significant Mexican dimension to it. So your interaction with the United States is a terribly complicated matter. By contrast, compare it with the Soviet Union in those days, in which the relationship with them was a life or death matter of security, but it was primarily unidimensional. It didn't have a 2,000 mile border and Mexico's endless complexities mixed in.

One of the things that happens as a consequence is that if things are going as they should, you deal directly with the portion of the United States Government that is most relevant to the nature of your problem in the binational relationship. If the problem was with the Treasury or with the narcs, we didn't go to USIA to intervene for us, just as the Ambassador did not go to the State Department to intervene on his behalf. We dealt directly with that portion of the US Government that was affecting us and the relationship, or in which the Mexicans had an interest.

It was quite clear that the border was important, as viewed from Mexican side and from the US side in terms of the State Governments and the academic, political, economic and other institutions along the frontier. Then, as now, this unique dimension to the relationship was fascinating. I was most eager to get a closer look at a program approach that had been begun earlier when I was in the Area Office, a border affairs officer. There was a staff member who was concentrated exclusively on developing programs around the unique nature of the relationship between Mexico and the US at the border.

Drugs, of course, constituted a huge overlay in the program. I found myself there, as I had been in two other posts, a member of the inner working group that met regularly, often weekly, to review what was new on the drug scene. And what was to be done about it. Narcotics related agencies aren't noted for cooperating with each other, but we could at least be aware of the direction that things were going. That period has come to be characterized by the abduction and murder of DEA agent Kiki Camarena, but that was just

Library of Congress

one dimension to it. There was tremendous interest on the part of the Administration and Congress, both on merit and in terms of the resources that we were trying to put into drug programs through the narcotics action unit and the DEA, and customs, and the station, and us and all the other dimensions of the mission that got involved.

Simultaneously, Mexico was dealing with the effects of a monumental devaluation and huge foreign debt. US banks and the USG had major interests in stabilizing the economy and seeing to it that their debt got paid or postponed. Socially, the economy's problems added complexity to the US private sector's problems in Mexico and a dramatic impetus to problems of immigration. All these, needless to say, were dynamic engines of public affairs problems we had to address.

Ambassador Jack Gavin - Good and Bad Marks

A great good news, bad news dimension to this era was the fact that Jack Gavin was Ambassador. Gavin, of course, had been head of the Screen Actors Guild, as President Reagan had been. He had been a leader in Republican party circles in California, he knew the President personally and well, he had been a prep school football teammate with the National Security Advisor and was able to get the people in the White House to answer the phone. In a surreal scene, he interviewed me, before consenting to my coming, in the underground situation room of the White House. He certainly didn't need the State Department to intervene with anybody for him, and indeed did not hold the State Department in particularly high esteem. Tony Motley, who was Assistant Secretary at the time, had the good sense to not want to touch Mexico with a long stick. The second person whom Gavin had inherited from State as DCM had been rooted out of the DCMship by a schedule C executive assistant to Gavin, a young ex-FSO whom he brought with him. The DCM was sent up to State ARA to be the Office Director, so that the Ambassador and his assistant would have somebody they felt they could trust in Washington. There was constant emphasis, bordering on paranoia, upon enemies in Washington, in the Mexican government, and in the media, US and Mexican. Personal loyalty to the Ambassador was

Library of Congress

seen as highly important. The executive assistant, not coincidentally, became acting DCM as a consequence of ousting the DCM, and moved into his house as well as his office. He was right out of Central Casting for the lead in "What Makes Sammy Run."

Q: Who was the DCM that they uprooted?

CHATTEN: A good, gray, earnest servant of the Department, George High. It got to the point where Gavin didn't want people in the various sections of the Embassy to report substantive things in cable traffic because he feared they would be leaked by enemies in Washington, to his detriment. It was an ugly time. Even with that, my own take on Gavin, is that he was, on balance, a good ambassador. Being ambassador to Mexico is always a study in tradeoffs. Whatever you do, on whatever issue, it automatically generates opposition both within the United States and most particularly, within Mexico. The best you can ever hope for in US-Mexican relations is sixty-forty. As in personnel work, happiness is a sixty-forty decision because your world is filled with fifty one-forty nines. Gavin spoke beautiful Spanish. He had been in and out of Mexico his whole life. His mother had been born Mexican, and he had a world of important and useful contacts who had been developed before he became ambassador. The primary thing, in my estimation, that stood between Jack Gavin and being as good an ambassador as you're ever going to get in Mexico, was his ego, which was monumental. It was essentially an actor's ego. The press, in his experience, was the entertainment industry press, full of critics and celebrity chasers who gave you good marks for your performance or who panned you. If you did not like a critic, you didn't invite him to press conferences. He seemingly had never had an occasion to deal with political and economic reporters, or reporters whose primary task was to deal with hard news. From the word "go", he had a fractious relationship with the American press dealing with Mexico, and an extremely difficult relationship with the Mexican press.

US - Mexican Trade

Library of Congress

Q: What was USIS doing in terms of promoting the idea of a general loosening of trade restrictions between Mexico and the United States, that preceded all the new treaties?

CHATTEN: It was interesting at the time and in retrospect, maybe even more significant than we knew. While economic relations had been on the table for a long time, the need for updating the nature of the relationship between Mexico and the United States, and Mexico and the world, in economic terms was in an embryonic stage then that I think eventually helped pave the way for passage of NAFTA. One of the messages that the mission was putting out and that we conducted public affairs programs around was that Mexico was more a player on the world economic stage than the internal rhetoric would lead you to believe. Much of the political rhetoric within Mexico at that time featured a poor underdeveloped country, always being taken advantaged of by the developed world. It held that they had to protect domestic markets and producers. That Mexico deserved special treatment and ought not be subject to the competition of the cold world.

Our message was contrary to that. We saw that Mexico was the twelfth largest economy of the world, and the second or third largest trading partner with the United States. It was an important supplier of petroleum products to the United States. One of the things that Gavin, to his credit frequently talked about in his discussions with Mexicans was the necessity for them ultimately to be a member of GATT. This was considered politically impossible for the leadership of Mexico, even though they believed in it at the palace. They could not or would not talk about it openly because there was so much domestic political opposition to it. In our programs of sending people back and forth to the United States, in the exposure that we gave to our speakers and specialists through our economic program officer, or the programs of the border affairs officer, we were continually emphasizing the other side of that message. Our perspective was of a Mexico that was big, important, and already integrated into the world economy. The interrelationship between the United States and Mexico was such that the only reasonable way for it to go was to become more and more open. I don't think many envisioned a NAFTA Treaty taking precisely the form

Library of Congress

that it did or coming quite as soon as it did. In the mid 1980's it would have been difficult to say that within ten years, there would be not only an acceptance of this politically, domestically within Mexico, but indeed an advocacy on the part of the people in the palace and the people in public life.

There is reason to assume that we played a respectable role in leading up to it and achieving the kind of public affairs climate that made it possible.

One of the things that I did there, as I had done regularly since Bolivia was to work carefully and closely with the American business community. I was a member of committees of the American Chamber of Commerce, as some, though not all, of my predecessors had been. We couldn't and didn't run their public affairs programs, but we tried to coordinate ours with theirs and tried to demonstrate to Mexican opinion leaders that it was in Mexico's interest and certainly in the interest of the bilateral relationship to be more open minded about foreign investment. Remember that American investment there was already huge, and a mixed bag of good corporate citizenship you must always look at that in the historical context of the second half of the nineteenth century and most of the first half of the twentieth century, during which Mexicans saw themselves as being victimized by foreign investment, most of it American, and that this led to foreign intervention, most of it American.

Q: And victimized by a few land grabs.

CHATTEN: No question about it. One of the enduring truths of dealing with Mexico and that is that Americans, in general, and the American Government very often, tend to look at what is important today and what's going to happen tomorrow. History from this perspective, is sort of interesting but something to be put behind us while we get on with the real work at hand. Meanwhile the real work at hand, from the Mexican's view, has everything to do with history. Americans, in dealing with Mexico, ignore history to their enormous peril. You cannot get away with evaluating the nature of the relationship or a

Library of Congress

deal that you make or a policy you are pursuing without taking their historical perspective into account. Their orthodoxy is that they have been screwed by outsiders - Spanish conquistadores, Rome-oriented clergy, French emperors and, in recent history, us. History is full of political hang ups about allowing us or any foreigners to have too much to do with what they consider "their affairs." Other forces and orthodoxies are taking hold but, much as our own traditions encourage doing so, history can't be put in a box and out of sight when dealing with Mexico.

Suspicious of US Motives

Q: Are you saying there is an underlying suspicion then, of most things American dealing with Mexico? Underlying suspicion of the motivation of those actions?

CHATTEN: At official levels, quite clearly. In dealing with Mexico, you've got to have a high tolerance for ambiguity. If you're putting together USIS programs, one of your great assets is that there is a great affinity for the United States at most popular levels. Despite the fact that in the media and some parts of the government and academe, it is almost irresistible to use the United States as a whipping boy, to be blamed for whatever ill may befall them, there is an enormous reservoir of good will toward the United States. In many cases, and among many audiences, this is backed by real understanding about the United States. It is very difficult, from the highest levels of government all the way down to the humblest levels of agricultural society, to deal with an individual Mexican for very long without finding out that he has some meaningful, personal relationship with the United States. He has waded the Rio Bravo himself to be an agricultural worker or earned a graduate degree there, as in the case of the last three Presidents. Those constitute both hang ups and huge advantages that we don't have with other places and it's part of the sea in which you swim when you're doing USIS work in Mexico. It's part of what makes it the ultimate graduate course in what USIS does. It's terribly complicated and fun.

Library of Congress

Q: Would you say that's the apex, or the most exciting USIS program that you were involved in?

CHATTEN: Oh, sure. And it has partly to do, I suppose, with my own personal history of having grown up partly near the border and having contemplated Mexico from afar as a kid without any understanding whatever of it. No question about it.

Poor Health Conditions

Q: I understand it that the health situation in Mexico City was pretty taxing on a lot of Americans working there. How did it affect you and your staff, the terrible pollution, the conditions there that prevail?

CHATTEN: Mexico was well on its way to becoming what it is now, a hardship post. For the first time, a systematic effort was being made to establish in the mind of the State Department, which calls the shots on such things, the seriousness of the health hazards that were present there. While we were there, Gavin, who was something of a hypochondriac anyway, really took this one to heart as a personal project. He got the EPA from the United States to come down and test the air and other parts of our environment. EPA came up with hard data that said that a canary will not live very long in the Embassy garage that we were in and out of constantly, if for no other reason than to go to the commissary.

Groundwork began being laid at that time for what has now become fairly common knowledge that is that this is a genuine hardship post. Other embassies were way ahead of us, as were some businesses, in decreeing shorter tours, and in cases of some European embassies, an unaccompanied post. I was medically evacuated because of a cough that I contracted there about half way through my first tour. The medics wanted to make sure that my cough and fever and other symptoms were not something more sinister. Now, ten years after it began, the cough is there to greet me every morning

Library of Congress

when I wake up. It has become chronic bronchitis. It is a great success of American medical science in that it has transferred a great deal of money from me and my insurance companies to the pockets of a lot of physicians, but it has not defined what the hell it is or what to do about it.

Q: This very serious ailment, — did it have anything to do with your leaving Mexico?

CHATTEN: It did in part. I loved USIS there. I had spent a lifetime building up to what I considered the job I was, in a sense, born for, which is only a little bit of an overstatement. But I had just come back from home leave after my first tour when the invitation came to go back to the Voice of America as Deputy Director. I was at that point past fifty. It was possible for me to take the money and run. My kids were out of school, and things were coming together that give you a whole different perspective on your own life. So I very reluctantly left, but I had pretty much decided as a consequence of my medical evacuation earlier that it might be necessary for me to leave for that reason anyway. So it was just coincidental, I suppose, that the opportunity to become the senior career person at VOA arose at that time.

Q: When did you check out of Mexico?

CHATTEN: In August of 1985.

Again to VOA - Deputy Director

Q: And very quickly then, moved in as a Deputy Director at VOA?

CHATTEN: In a sense, it was a homecoming there too, because I had been there earlier in the Latin American Division and still had a lot of friends around the place. In those days anyway, filling the job of Deputy Director at the Voice of America with a senior, career, foreign service person was one of the great balancing acts of personnel and senior management of the Agency. You needed somebody who was going to fill the

Library of Congress

role of trying to keep the Voice of America as linked to the rest of the Agency as you could. But at the same time, he had to be acceptable to people who looked upon VOA as a career and radio as a completely separate kind of thing, rather than a piece of the communications whole. Someone who had served there earlier, someone who had a great deal of sympathy for the Voice but someone who had his own credibility within the regular foreign service of the Agency, was the traditional prescription for that. I just happened to be fortunate enough to be able to fill it at that moment.

The Voice has meandered off in other directions since that time and heaven knows whether that will be for the best but everyone is apprehensive, both the foreign service and VOA careerists.

Q: What were your trepidations at reentering the Voice at that very senior level where you were in a decision making position?

CHATTEN: I suppose the challenge at that time resided in convincing the core of the place, the news operation, that the foreign service did not constitute a threat to it, that we considered it an integral part of the Agency's mission. They needed to know that most of us saw the news operation of the Voice of America as being unique, that it was a matter around which cooperation could and ought to be formed rather than the crux of an adversarial relationship. We're talking here about suspicion, and occasional enmity toward the foreign service and toward USIA, in general, that was endemic within the Voice. This resided most particularly within the news division. Having come out of the news business myself gave me a little bit of an advantage there but one that you always had to nurture. And so I tried to stay close to the news people. I was naturally close to the language division people, because I had worked in a language division and I had worked overseas. But the Voice was then, and continues now, a great, strange creature. You can spend full time keeping the Georgians and the Azerbaijanis from murdering each other, if you allow yourself to get sucked into that.

Library of Congress

There was going on, simultaneously, a couple of other subplots that turned out to be important. One was that Mort Smith, who also carried the title of Deputy Director, but for development. The Reagan Administration and Charlie Wick had gotten the Congress to appropriate a large amount of money, a billion three in total, for so-called "modernization." It incorporated the negotiation of new transmitter sites and upgrading all kinds of things within the physical structure of the Voice and the whole engineering division and the transmitters. It involved some things that ultimately never came to pass, like building a new transmitter site in Israel. And so you have this other enormously funded sideshow going on under the aegis of a fellow foreign service person, with whom I had a long relationship, who also carried a Deputy Director title, but who was doing something else entirely.

External and In-House Political Intrigues

Then you had Gene Pell, who had been in and out of the Voice of America, as Director of VOA. He was an extraordinarily, adroit, bureaucratic maneuverer and one who could and did invoke his own radio and television credentials and his long relationship with the Soviet Union to legitimize his tenure there. He didn't have any loyalties to USIA, per se, but and he had a lot of people believing that he did have the institutional interests of VOA at heart. What he turned out to have was the personal well being of Gene Pell at heart. Having left the Voice of America precipitously, in an earlier incarnation, as program manager, he came back and announced that he was in for the long term. But less than two months after I arrived there, Pell had negotiated for himself the presidency of RFE and RL and bailed out. A lot of people at the Voice felt betrayed by Pell, whose talk of "the magic of radio" had been very seductive and who looked on him as being one of their own.

Q: He left for Radio Free Europe and Radio Liberty in Europe? And your credentials as a foreign service officer among the civil service so-called journalists added more suspicion to the scene?

Library of Congress

CHATTEN: Perpetually. It was an interesting time during which a lot of disparate things had to be balanced, a not uncommon state of affairs at the Voice. Meanwhile the Agency front office was thrashing around trying to figure out how to refill the politically sensitive office of VOA Director and unable to come up with a solution. Unfortunately, the Wick and Marvin Stone solution to this was to succumb to all of the pressure that, real and imagined, they were subject to on the part of White House personnel. In playing a very political game, we fell into a pattern in which all of the names which surfaced for the job were allowed to be run past political litmus tests set up by the hard right. They were essentially given a veto over the nomination of new potential candidates for the Directorship of VOA.

After a few months of this, the temporary solution that emerged was to take Dick Carlson, who had been the unsuccessful candidate for Mayor of San Diego and who had landed as a political liability on various Washington doorsteps. He had been given the public liaison job in USIA as reward for fighting the good Republican fight in Southern California and had survived something on the order of three months without being thrown out by Charlie Wick in his mercurial way. That was considered enough of the success to be named as Acting Director of the Voice of America. He had a television broadcasting background in San Diego so it wasn't totally illogical, but he had no history of international communications, had no history of knowing what the hell USIA was all about. Wick, with similar blank spots in his background, hardly would have considered these to be serious liabilities.

Dick wasn't a bad fellow, but he had absolutely everything to learn and was essentially a political creature. But he stuck around for long enough and through enough ups and downs of trying to find a full-time , Richard Vigories and some other people, with the crazed right VOA Director, that by process of elimination he was named to the job. While that process was unfolding, the front office of the Agency, usually on its own, sometimes in collaboration with the personnel people at the White House, but never in consultation with other people at the Voice of America or the rest of the Agency, was playing all kinds of games. Several months into the process I read in a right wing publication that my

Library of Congress

job, the senior career job, had been offered as a bargaining chip to a staff member of Representative Michel's staff in order to buy political peace. This was said to be part of a deal to name somebody else as head of the Voice of America who would have been acceptable to the hard right.

About a week after that came up, USIA Deputy Director Marvin Stone asked me over to talk. He confirmed that indeed they had offered my job to somebody from the Hill. Of course, he said, I was not to take this personally, and that they would certainly be happy to give me some other job in the Agency that was commensurate with my background. He offered me an area directorship and a couple of other things. The fact was, he said, that I had to go because they needed maneuvering room to work through their broadcasting dilemma.

I said, "Thank you very much, let me get back to you." In the week following that meeting, John Chancellor went on the air saying the Administration ought to be cautioned about politicizing the Voice, and The Washington Post waded into the debate about who ought to be VOA Director. The gist was that politicizing the Voice of America was totally unacceptable, and that doing so would be a wrongheaded move by the Administration. This got the attention of some people on the Hill who started making inquiries. A week or so later I was called back over to Stone's office.

Whereas previously the solution to the problem was that I had to go, now the solution to the problem was that I had to stay in order to give the reality or the illusion that things were on an even keel. I said, "Thank you very much for that vote of confidence, let me get back to you."

About a week after that, I finally decided that life was too short for this kind of thing and said, in effect "Screw you, I quit. There is another solution to my problem and your problem. I'm out of here" "Ah, well," came the response, "that isn't what we had in mind at all." That set off a chain of events in my own life and in the evolution of the Voice of

Library of Congress

America that continues to this day. My own little drama wasn't pivotal by any means, but it assuredly was a part of it.

Q: What happened to the quality of broadcasting during this period?

CHATTEN: I think it was greatly to the credit of the professionalism of the people at the Voice of America that the quality was very high and remained that way. Indeed, one of the things that I took most seriously in my tenure there was to take as much of that kind of outside heat as I possibly could upon myself in order to protect them as much as I could.

Some of them, especially in some of the language divisions are not really interested in being protected from controversy. If they see an opening on the Hill that might be to their advantage, they'll always run to whomever they think can help them. But the news division was in one of its great periods, I think, and was doing international news, features and backgrounders probably better than anybody else in the world. The language divisions were very good indeed, on the whole.

A lot of this quality derived from the transfusions of funds we got in the modernization program of the early Wick days. We were building new studios, improving the technical quality of the product, getting the language services up to full staffing, and undertaking initiatives like listener relations programs and a training operation. It was a very good time from a programming point of view and from the work that was being done by the staff, which I think deserves a great deal of credit. The engineering staff was still wedded to short-wave broadcasting, a position on which they now have become much more flexible.

I don't know how much credit you can lay at the feet of the VOA front office but I certainly considered that one of my primary tasks was to try to protect the broadcasters from political heat. That's what that job has always entailed in a sense.

Take, for example, the charter of the Voice, which I had not been particularly enthusiastic about when it was being considered and when it finally was legislated into law. I came to

Library of Congress

view the Charter as a great shield. I spent more of my time on the phone trying to deflect people in other parts of government who wanted to put some kind of spin on the news than I ever had thought would be possible or necessary. I came to have a pretty straightforward line that I don't think they ever were able to deflect or penetrate:

"If you guys want to make news of some kind, then get a newsmaker to say whatever it is that you want said and, I promise you, we will cover it as news. But we will not either create news or put something in or take something out of coverage on your subject. It ought to be self-evident in this most political of towns that if you want coverage, there's a way to get it. Make some news, and we'll cover it, and your point of view will get out and it will be treated seriously. It seems so straightforward that you sometimes wonder why it is so hard for many people to understand. People worry about policy spin working its way into news coverage, beyond VOA responsibility to reflect both Administration perspective and Americana separately. For me, the answer was simple. The overriding policy on news was to tell it straight and understandably as we could.

Conclusions about USIA, Public Diplomacy, Service

Q: Bob, we're coming close to the end of our interview. I think it might be useful if you were to cast back over your twenty seven years with the Agency - 1959 to 1986 - You saw a lot of changes in the three to four decades - and reflect on any particular points you'd like to bring out in summary. So why don't you take it from there and just sort of roll on.

CHATTEN: This is the kind of thing that is probably best done with a bourbon and branch at the end of the day.

Q: Well, we can get that.

CHATTEN: Lot of changes, a lot of things the same. One of the things that was true at first, though not everybody would have said so, is that you can't make propaganda, you can't make public affairs, you can't make what, a bit pretentiously, came to be called as

Library of Congress

public diplomacy in a vacuum. It is not something that you can send a crew of people of presumed experts off into a corner to conduct. It has to become integrated into the entire government effort or it's not going to work.

One of the old axioms from the advertising business is you can't pour perfume on a goat and have it be anything but a goat. Various people in the rest of the foreign affairs community were instinctively attuned to that message from the first; some of them were not. A number of the career people in leadership positions in USIA understood that and articulated it, but some did not. Every once in a while you would get some people, especially political types superimposed upon the process who didn't quite realize it. I think that during my time we saw the evolution of the whole notion of what people in the Agency do. This realization, I think, came to be integrated into the conduct of foreign affairs. Public diplomacy, and I'm not crazy about the phrase, came to be integrated more and more and given more and more legitimacy, in the conduct of the US Government foreign relations.

I'm fond of a quote that is attributed to Teddy Roosevelt, perhaps reliably, that there was no question that the United States would exert leadership in his world of manifest destiny, only whether it would do it well or poorly. If you take that analogy into the Agency, there is no question that the United States is going to conduct public diplomacy and the kind of programs that well-run public diplomacy encompasses. The only question is whether or not you're going to do it well or poorly. That's the basis of my own, very personal, feeling about the argument for the existence of USIA. Burying the functions in the State Department or forming dismembered parts all over the government missed the point entirely that the taxpayers of the United States deserve a coordinated approach. They deserve better than having the radio portion of it conducted over on one little island and the exchange and cultural relations portion of it on another island. The only way the taxpayers are going to get reasonable bang for their buck has got to begin with doing it in the most integrated fashion that you possibly can.

Library of Congress

I do not believe it is possible to give the function its due if it is submerged in the State Department. The function will be denigrated and the resources cannibalized unless leadership becomes a lot more forceful than it has been recently. Each succeeding generation of politicians and political masters of foreign affairs will have to be reeducated in order to understand that, legitimate skeptics and yahoos to the contrary. I think that there is more general agreement on that now than there used to be. When you and I came in, in the '50s, there were an awful lot of people in the State Department who didn't think about it deeply, if at all. There was a lot of, "what are you doing in this peripheral enterprise? You seem like a bright, young man to me. Why don't you join the real foreign service?". Among some State Department old timers, there still is abroad in the land the idea that concern about foreign public opinion is a peripheral enterprise.

A lot of our techniques have changed. Quantifying programs can be useful but is not a particularly good idea if that is to be the central determinant of what you do. There always will be subjective analyses that are more important than quantifying the number of contacts that you have, the number of things that you get on the air, the number of speakers that you have. We all can remember people who thought that quantification was the most important thing that you could possibly be doing. The subjective analyses of how you arrive at quality of communications and how you go about doing it, has in my mind always got to be at the core of what you're doing. Quantifying helps you arrive at some notion as to the way that you're spreading that quality around. If you don't start with quality, the quantity is irrelevant. And that's a notion that's made some progress and the Agency has tried lots of ways to go about it and has learned some pretty tough lessons. We've learned that deciding from some central location what a country program ought to look like abroad is inherently a bad idea. The negotiation of what is appropriate for a country program should begin in the field, flowing from the Mission back to Washington. Obviously, there has got to be some discipline in terms of serving American interests, but American interests vary from place to place and how you go about doing it are as different as Spain and Indonesia under their different former dictatorships. The fact that you've got

Library of Congress

two dictatorships there don't mean that Spain and Indonesia have got the same kind of program. That's inherently silly.

The way that we can communicate ideas and information has changed enormously, from the old clackety clack wireless file that we inherited from the US Army Signal Corps to today's satellite communications. That changes a lot about how you do things, but it doesn't change essentially what you do. It's easy to dismiss clichés because you've heard them so often without thinking that clichés are repeated because they are, in the last analyses, true. The old Murrow dictum about the last three feet being the most important distance in the communications chain, deserves to be repeated as many times as you can get people to think about it. The fact that your message comes via one of those old Signal Corps teletypes, handed down from the Army at a cut rate, or by satellite does not change the nature of how you get it in across to the person or the group that you're trying to communicate with.

I'm encouraged by the integration of the notion of Public Diplomacy into the conduct of foreign relations. I'm not encouraged by the shallowness of the vision and ability of a lot of political leadership that comes to the Agency.

Most Important Support -Family

Q: A number of Foreign Service Officers felt that their family support was extremely important to their careers and to their professional competence and successes. And I know you come from a wonderful family. Do you have any comments about their relevancy?

CHATTEN: No retrospective on a life in the business can ignore that dimension to it and certainly, in my case, it played a central role. There is no way that I could have gone to places I did, done some of the things that I was given the opportunity to do, without being in partnership with Pat Chatten and ultimately with the family. That's a standard part of the advice I give whenever anybody trots out the new JOT class or I'm asked for perspectives

Library of Congress

by somebody who is thinking about a career in the Foreign Service. If your family is not on board, if they don't want to embark upon this adventure with you, then forget it. You're not going to be successful.

I'm married to a woman who came as close to being the textbook perfect foreign service wife as anyone. She not only went along with it all, enjoying it, but looked upon it as a right and reasonable thing to do. That isn't to say that there aren't hard times, but if you don't approach the whole endeavor with enthusiasm, as I was fortunate enough to have a family doing, the foreign service isn't going to work for you; not the professional side of it, not the personal, not the health side. None of it! It requires somebody who understands and who plays the game in all of its eccentric ways and who brings balance to dealing with crazy ambassadors and eccentric PAOs, as well as hardship posts and the exotica of raising a family abroad.

My wife now works for the Central Intelligence Agency. She is at the foreign Broadcast Information Service and so it is possible to talk about it more openly than some other people might. It was never possible, in my view, for her to do anything like that while we were overseas and we never considered it. But once we were back in the United States and when I was retiring from the foreign service, then it became possible for her to embark upon what, after the age of fifty, turned out to be a very successful career of her own.

She will be the first to attribute her success there to the background she had in this wonderful, exotic kind of life that we had.

Foreign Service kids, in my experience, by and large, do take advantage of their unique opportunities and are better people. They become better adults, better individuals. They deal better with new circumstances, good and bad, and deal better with other people because they've had this unique upbringing. When they crash, they can crash spectacularly. but we've been very fortunate. Our two boys took great advantage of it and are much the better for it. We were in it at a good time, during the evolutionary period of

Library of Congress

the Agency, that was fun to be a part of. James Michener who spent a number of years on the Advisory Commission once said that it seemed to him that the Agency was a lot more professional now but a lot less fun. I hope that isn't the case for those who follow.

End of interview